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**Until the red heart beats: Rhetorical fusion in the fiction of
Toni Morrison**

Locklear, Glorianna, Ph.D.

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, 1993

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UNTIL THE RED HEART BEATS:

RHETORICAL FUSION IN

THE FICTION OF

TONI MORRISON

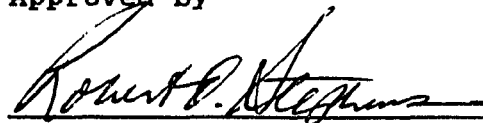
by

Glorianna Locklear

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the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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1993

Approved by

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Robert P. Stephens", is written over a horizontal line.

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Toni Morrison has created a sort of fiction that blends poetic techniques with prose narrative for the express purpose of changing the reader's encounter with her texts from observation to active participation, evoking engagement of the heart as well as the head. She does this in part by providing spacious ambiguity through shifting centers of consciousness within the narrative voices. Morrison also provides a wealth of specific detail in the form of figurative language, especially patterns of imagery that twine through each book. Together these poetic techniques insure that Morrison's connotative language is equally as important as her denotative in bringing the reader into immediate experience of Morrison's created worlds.

In the chapter on The Bluest Eye this blended artform is studied by close explication of the book as a whole, treating it as if it were a poem in terms of image patterns and questions of language use. Beloved is studied in the second chapter through a detailed following of one strand in the image patterns that create Sethe, Paul D, Sixo and Beloved. The narration of the climactic sixteenth chapter is

explicated by following the shifts in center of consciousness that frequently occur. These images patterns and narrative shifts give rise to the concrete details and resonant ambiguity that are the cornerstones of Morrison's poetic technique. The third chapter considers Jazz, which emphasizes the intrinsic music of language as well as the narrative shifts and image patterns, adding yet another experiential dimension to Morrison's work. In the end it is clear that Morrison fully intends for the reader to enter each of her books as if crossing the border into a new, perhaps dangerous, country. Her fusion of poetic technique to narrative form provides the passport.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the everlasting light that streams through the memories of Dr. Amy M. Charles, Dr. Pat Jarrard, Dr. Gwen Loy, Edna Upchurch, Diane Snipes and Thad Coates. They continue to light the way for all those who love them.

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I'd also like to thank my tribe of true affections: Nancy Moore, Olivia Hurd, Dr. Martha Morehead, Elvenia Locklear, the Wells, Sherry Freeman, Pat Metcalf, Jackie Hendren, Katharine Redmond, Anita Stelle, Virginia Staley, T.L.C. Weston, Tina Tommy, the Wismerei, the Snugs, the Jeffreys-Browns, Tom and Martha MacLennan, and Bobby and Elma Lee Snipes. This tribe also includes Dr. Denise Baker, Dr. Jean Buchert, Dr. Elisabeth Bowles, the Irving-Bruces, Sara Scott Beard, Mary Lou Merrell, Kitty McAmis, Sylvia Watson, Carol Johnson, Linda Patterson, John Ellison, Alex Smoot, David Queen, Sherry Riddick, Tracey Douglas, and two gifted shamen, Jane Rosen-Grandon and Dr. Walter H. Schmitt. I'm also grateful to the Friends of Glorianna, Western Guilford Branch, Charlie Griffin, CEO; and the F.O.G. People, UNC-G Branch, led by Carolyn Mathews, Marsha Holmes, Katharine Purcell, and Marcy Rice. You are all with me in everything I do; as is Bo Jeffreys, who tends the glow.

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the poem entitled, "The Layers"

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TONI MORRISON: AN INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison has striven since her first novel to create a kind of fiction in which connotative language is fully as important as denotative, and whose aim is shared experience rather than just transmission of information. To that end she entwines elements of poetry intimately with the conventions of narrative fiction. Rather than holding plot in reserve to lure the reader on, she often reveals her subject from the outset of the book, and does so in ways that are ambiguous, metaphorical, and oblique: qualities often thought of as poetic. She is also a consummate creator of image patterns, many of which take form at the beginning and twine their way through the book until the very end. This creates a cohesiveness of vision that helps to unify the book into an experiential encounter rather than a sequential, formalized exchange between storyteller and recipient.

To create this connotative language and image patterning, Morrison uses many of the basic tools of poetic

technique. Her figurative language is both wide and varied, including but not limited to metaphor, personification, metonymy, synaesthesia, symbolism, paradox, and irony. Metaphors are the basic building blocks of her image patterns, along with sensory detail. Irony looms large, as does implicit paradox. Besides using these to establish tone and mood, Morrison also uses the innate rhythms of many forms of language, such as gossip, song, call and response, and interior monologue, and even makes use of scannable meter to cement sound and meaning. Morrison is completely aware that the basis of poetry is carefully chosen concrete detail and resonant, spacious ambiguity, which engender emotional intensity. The effect is sharable emotional experience created by way of language: the medium is both the message and the message.

Morrison also achieves commonality by manipulation of the narrative voices that present the stories. They often speak from points of view as oblique and ambiguous as her plot revelations, and like them they gather force by accumulation, quietly shoveling a landslide of shared experience into the reader's psyche. Rather than using one or even two easily discernible narrative voices, she often

creates multiple centers of consciousness from which the stories unfold, enabling her to achieve a shifting, kaleidoscopic effect that compels attention. Boundaries blur and blend. Within the narration language itself is fluid, plastic in the best sense, and often used in extraordinary ways to draw the reader into the world that Morrison creates. This, finally, is what Morrison is after: a created world. She uses language to create a human reality that all people can share by experiencing the same travails as her characters. This goes beyond the vicarious experience that novels usually evoke because we are made to feel with, not for, her people. We do not just feel sorry for Pecola, we know what it is to be her, caught fast in the spinning vortex of fate. Jazz spins us along on a communal sea of sound and feeling. Beloved demands compassion and a will to understand from the very beginning, and if we do the work good readers must, we become part of a world we can only experience with Morrison as our partner in creation. As John Leonard says, "Without Beloved, our imagination of America had a heart-sized hole in it big enough to die from." (715)

Toni Morrison is also a writer fully aware that she does not create her worlds by herself, but with the active

assistance of the reader. As she said in a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate, "My writing expects, demands, participatory reading . . . We (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience" (125). This accords well with the idea of the active reader first suggested by Louise Rosenblatt in 1938 in Literature as Exploration, and formalized so elegantly in 1978 in The Reader the Text the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work. This idea of the reader as active co-creator of the literary work has been propagated widely by Wolfgang Iser, David Bleich, C. S. Peirce, Suzanne Langer, and Ann Berthoff, just a few of the many who have made this a main current in the stream of modern rhetorical thought. Toni Morrison does all she can to invite this collaboration by fusing some of the most effective elements of poetry into her stories. The result may appear to be only a novel, but is in fact a hybrid artform, one which inherits the best elements of its two parent stocks.

In each of her books, Morrison tries to make a world that is not just intelligible but deeply felt. She creates no secondhand Yoknapatawpha or Dublin, but a realm carved out of the experience of African Americans in this country.

Morrison works from this matrix because it is her personal growth medium, as the American South was Faulkner's and Dublin Joyce's. Her people happen to be black because she happens to, but they are like Faulkner's and Joyce's in their underlying universality. This universality transcends all time, place, and color. Morrison's work is unique in being about humans who happen to be black, and not only about blacks striving to be accepted as human. Blackness is an informing factor of life, not life itself. This opens the way to universal commonality, the keystone of all literature that outlasts a mode. Morrison manages this to a greater degree than any other African American writer, making her work worthy of close scrutiny.

To learn how Morrison achieves such universality, we will examine the books that are the most suitable to that purpose. The Bluest Eye will be explicated in close detail, much as a sonnet can be parsed to see what makes it work. Its brevity (160 pages) lends itself to such a reading. The Bluest Eye is especially important to understanding Morrison's development of technique because it is her first revelation of the aesthetic belief system that is the binding factor of all her work. We will also examine Beloved

closely, because it is the most nearly perfect enactment of that aesthetic ethos, and Jazz because it is a further step into hybridization, embodying facets of poetry, narrative, and music.

Close examination of Sula and Tar Baby would mainly reiterate what we can learn about Morrison better from The Bluest Eye. Any in-depth study of Song of Solomon would have to take into account the tidal wave of criticism that has already washed over it, including much that does in part what we will do as a whole for The Bluest Eye. The image pattern of flying, in particular, has been written about at enormous length, and little new would be accomplished by retracing that path. The same applies to several of the other image patterns, and the question of narrative voice has been extensively discussed as well. The Bluest Eye has never gotten all the critical attention it deserves, and no one has considered it thoroughly as a cohesive whole. Beloved is an enormously complicated, subtle book that will be studied fruitfully for many years to come, from many angles. Jazz is too recent to have been turned inside out yet, but much of what has been written misses a vital connection to Beloved, as well as the overwhelming emphasis

on sound quality. These three books will best reward the demands of intense involvement, teaching us how Morrison's fusion of poetry and prose results in commonality through collaborative imagination.

CHAPTER ONE: THE BLUEST EYE STARES US DOWN

Nobody really understands The Bluest Eye. Maybe nobody is meant to. Morrison is not after cerebral understanding so much as visceral involvement, a total commitment of the reader to real compassion for the characters she creates. She wants us to learn as they learn, suffer as they suffer, endure as they endure. From the beginning Morrison strives for a prose that is not prosaic, that removes the reader from the commonplace boundaries of head knowledge and into a world where compassion returns to its root sense of "suffering with." Morrison wants her reader out of the realm of divisive, tongue-clucking pity, and into the land where her characters find their being. If it is a nightmare landscape at times, so be it. Nobody, least of all Toni Morrison, ever said it was going to be easy to become full citizens of a strange new land.

In this first novel Morrison starts out with a mighty thrust against the confining strictures of linear narrative, pushing the envelope in several directions at once. It is

clear from the beginning that she is not out to tell a story in the usual fashion of the writer supplying the story and the reader the ears to listen. Morrison insists right from the start that the reader must not sit outside the book, but come inside and participate.¹ She manages this by diverse means, including purposeful manipulation of the narrative voice and creation of ongoing patterns of imagery that knit the novel tightly together as an experiential whole. These two techniques are not separate phenomena, but intertwine constantly, a convolvulus of cause and effect. The flower of this entwinement is our eventual conviction of the kinship we share with Pecola, her family, and all humanity. Morrison cultivates this delicate growth through careful fusion of prose and poetic technique.²

The seed is planted in the very first paragraph, a compression of the Dick and Jane story, that eternal smiling commercial for white middle class life. For many years Dick-and-Jane was the collective dream of most American children, imposed upon them by schools and the rest of society's juggernaut forces. These forces are the underlying text of The Bluest Eye, which Morrison signals right from the beginning. The passage of Jane-talk that Morrison creates is

of importance to every facet of the book, and for that reason quoted here in its entirety:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play. Who will play with Jane? See the cat. It goes meow-meow. Come and play. Come play with Jane. The kitten will not play. See Mother. Mother is very nice. Mother, will you play with Jane? Mother laughs. Laugh, Mother, laugh. See Father. He is big and strong. Father, will you play with Jane? Father is smiling. Smile, Father, smile. See the dog. Bowwow goes the dog. Do you want to play with Jane? See the dog run. Run, dog, run. Look, look. Here comes a friend. The friend will play with Jane. They will play a good game. Play, Jane, play.

(The Bluest Eye 7. Washington Square Press.
All page references are to this edition.)

This slight passage serves notice that this is not an ordinary book, that some new game is afoot.³ It draws the reader in with an air of deadpan mystery and sets many barbs of curiosity, including why any serious writer would start off with a concoction of ersatz Dick and Jane. Jane-talk, as we will call it, exudes an air of innocence as it reveals social stereotyping. It also sets the rest of the story into a social framework, a context of time and place, and its bland emptiness proves in fact to be a foil for the painful particularity of Pecola Breedlove. The specious universality

of the Dick and Jane story highlights the truer universality that Morrison seeks to engender. In addition, the four elements of color suggest the importance color will play throughout the novel, both as indicator of mood and as component of image patterns. Bonnie Shipman Lange has written a provocative piece called "Toni Morrison's Rainbow Code," in which she asserts that Morrison uses colors in patterns not only in The Bluest Eye, but all through her first four books, with consistency of effect from book to book. She feels that this is a deliberate device because "color sensation provides continuity for explaining the richness of experience held in common . . . the colors create waves of sensation" (173-4), close to what Morrison herself says to Claudia Tate: "I must use my craft to make the reader see the colors and hear the sounds." (120)

This initial presentation of Jane-talk is a microcosm of the world of the novel, and presents the dramatis personae by suggesting the overwhelming importance of family relationship, and Pecola-Jane as the hub of that circle. It encapsulates her odyssey from one person to the other for verification, a search made even more poignant by the imbedded suggestions that it is doomed to failure. Mother

and Father are urged to laugh and smile with Pecola-Jane, but they never do. This bit of Jane-talk is also redolent of the pain caused Pecola-Jane by her contacts with animals and the people who control them. The kitten will not play. The dog cannot play. The intense irony of such mild evocations of Pecola-Jane's anguish builds slowly throughout the novel.

The last element in this encapsulation of Pecola-Jane's trek is her "friend," which exudes irony when we find out that by the end of the story the only friend Pecola has left is her schizophrenic self. Indeed, by the end of the novel we have a much deeper understanding of why Morrison chooses to start this way, an understanding that makes us want to reexamine where we ourselves began our journey into The Bluest Eye. It becomes difficult to discriminate between what we knew from this beginning and what we learn from our sojourn in the world of Pecola Breedlove. Our reaction becomes an experiential whole, as Morrison clearly intends. Thus, this little paragraph is both provocative and summative, evocative and cognitive. It snatches us in with a quick pull, and eventually sends us full circle in our participation in the Breedlove world, as we come to realize that the passage is a small, jewel-like paradigm of that

world. Seemingly innocuous, it is in fact a compression of all that will happen to Pecola-Jane. Compression, of course, is one of the widely accepted defining characteristics of poetry.

Having done so much with so little, Morrison astounds the reader by doing it again, and again. Immediately after this passage the same words are printed again, but without capital letters, punctuation, or sentence breaks. Then it is printed yet again, without even word breaks, as if the Jane-talk were rolling downhill, going faster and faster. In the second printing the usual sense is harder to gather, but it is still possible without undue effort. At the very least this makes it clear that conventions can and will be dispensed with. In the completely runtogether version, the effect is blurred and the literal sense can only be picked out of the speed and jumble with careful attention. The sense patterns tend to shift and rearrange themselves in new configurations, creating a sort of trompe l'oeil text, one in which the reader must be prepared to look sharp for the shape of things, as well as be prepared for the fact that there is more than one configuration possible at any moment, and new understanding can be piled upon new understanding.

The reader must also be prepared to see through a glass darkly here at the beginning in order to see with the stark clarity that is the final vision of The Bluest Eye. This compression to the point of unintelligibility suggests that the story can be decoded, but only with painstaking, excruciating care. The Bluest Eye demands total involvement at the level of language itself; words cease to be a vehicle for meaning and become meaning in themselves. The subjective split between content and form will be fused here, at least some of the time. Since this split exists only as a matter of the reader's attention and the writer's emphasis, it is largely Morrison's innovative approach to language as experience that effects the healing magic. Another defining characteristic of poetry is that language and meaning are much closer on the continuum of content and form than they generally are in prose. Morrison's innovative use of language can sometimes twist that continuum into an elegant Moebius strip.

We cannot yet answer one of the basic questions about Jane-talk: who is talking? Whose voice is this, whose sensibility? We don't know, and Morrison doesn't tell us. The who is not so important as the what, perhaps, but we may

come to find one nested inside the other, the inseparability a message in itself. For now, the passage sounds a major chord which sets the tone, indicating that language will serve sense and feeling simultaneously. This omniscient Jane-speaker cannot be assumed to be Morrison's natural, personal voice alone, as it is too patterned, too clearly crafted a creation. It is a literary artifact as much as any other narrative voice, but one whose source cannot be assigned with any certainty. Morrison does this for reasons that appear only gradually, but the ambiguity works toward the fusion of feeling and sense. Although most critics assume that there are two narrators, Claudia and an omniscient speaker, at least two think that there are three; but not the same three. Doreatha Mbalia discerns "Claudia the child, Claudia the adult, and an omniscient narrator" (35), while Valerie Smith hears Claudia, an "ostensibly omniscient narrator," and the "voice of the primer" (124-5). For our study, we will differentiate between Claudia and a voice to be called the Jane-speaker, who is both more and less than an omniscient narrator, and includes the speaker of the primer.

As if this mysterious chord were not enough, Morrison provides another introduction, one printed in italics (on p.9) to set it apart as different, and spoken in the voice that we will learn is Claudia MacTeer's. Claudia is not at first identified as the narrator, any more than the Jane-speaker is. Morrison may want the voices established apart from particular personality for reasons of both variance and harmony. These two pieces are not spoken by the same voice, but they do emanate from the same situation. This creates a doubling of view: twin windows into the Breedlove world. It also reverberates verisimilitude back and forth, since to accept one voice as truthful is to accept the other. Contrast and comparison are implicit.

This second introduction also performs many narrative tasks. It tells us the time we're in: "the fall of 1941." It tells us that something is wrong with the natural world: "There were no marigolds." It announces the central plot issue: "Pecola was having her father's baby." It proclaims the innocence of Claudia and her sister, their naive belief in personal magic: "if we planted the seeds, and said the right words over them, they would blossom, and everything would be all right." We find out that considerable time has

passed since the events of 1941: "It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to ourselves that no green was going to spring from our seeds." Several times it repeats an important image pattern, that of the blighted natural world and fruitless planting, as in the no-green quote, the marigold quote, and "We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt." It reveals the denouement: "Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. The seeds shriveled and died; her baby too." And finally it presents the modus operandi of the story: "There is really nothing more to say -- except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how." (9) We are never allowed to forget the impending doom of Pecola Breedlove. Her end is no secret, and each evocation of it makes it more necessary to find out how it could have happened.³

This is what Morrison does in The Bluest Eye: she brings us into the world of the Breedlove family, and makes us experience how these things could have happened. Our sometime guide will be the adult voice of Claudia MacTeer, looking back from a mature viewpoint to the time she was a

small girl indeed, and witness to the dissolution of Pecola-Jane. Her voice is alternated with another that seems to be the speaker of the Jane-talk, as each section in which it appears is heralded by a reconfigured quote from the original Jane-talk passage. These reconfigurations are themselves commentaries on and perhaps templates of the events in the sections they head.

One of the major image patterns of the novel, the interdependence of nature and human life, is signaled by the division of the book into four parts named for the seasons. Rejecting the usual progression, Morrison's first section is "Autumn," followed by "Winter," "Spring," and "Summer." Autumn is usually seen as a time of gentle decline, a dying away of the joys of summer into the frozen wasteland of winter. This, ironically, will be Pecola's best time.

Within this first section are three subsections, only the first of which is in Claudia's voice. Its basic function is to set up the identities of Claudia and Pecola and to establish the milieu. The first subsection leaves Pecola ripe and poised for the trouble that soon will dog her to destruction. In the second subsection, the Jane-speaker presents the Breedlove family's house, moving outward from

things to people. The third subsection is itself divided into three smaller parts. The first paints a group portrait of the Breedlove family, no two of whom stand together, living largely as strangers in the same house except for the furious involvement of Mrs. Breedlove and her husband. The second part shows us Pecola in her neighborhood, especially in relationship to the storekeeper Mr. Yacobowski, who hurts and frightens her. In the third part we go with Pecola to visit her only near-allies, the whores who are more indifferent to Pecola than anything else. This indifference is her best relationship, an ironic mirroring of autumn as her best time. All events devolve toward a picture of a Pecola who is luckless, friendless, and powerless. This is in itself a thumbnail sketch of the full portrait we will have of her by the end of the book. Again, as in the twin introductions, Morrison tells us what is to happen, making no secret of the plot. The emphasis will always be on how it came to be, through which we will learn the why. Through the use of small events to mirror large, Morrison keeps our attention focused on the large, our eyes glued to the anti-prize. Each foreshadowing focuses our attention more strongly on the ultimate immolation of this child. We are

never allowed to forget that things are not going to turn out well for little Pecola-Jane. The mother will not play. The dog runs away. There were no marigolds that year.

Claudia's subsection opens strangely: "Nuns go by as quiet as lust, and drunken men and sober eyes sing in the lobby of the Greek hotel." (12) This sentence, with a surrealistic, Magritte-like quality, is in fact another small mirror of the larger reality. C. O. Ogunyemi feels it proves that the novel is set in a world that is grotesque (114), but this may be too large an extrapolation. The pairing of the seemingly sacred and profane is at least a suggestion that positional power and illicit lust can exist simultaneously, as it will in Pecola's father. Drunken men and sober eyes suggest that drunkenness is no real excuse, that some part of the mind is always aware, always able to shape thought, to "sing." This glimpse of language-making is in the lobby of the Greek hotel, an ostensibly desirable place, but where we soon find that cursing has been raised to an artform. Thus in one sentence Morrison has introduced lust, power, drunkenness, accountability, language, and the power of place. The Greekness of the hotel simultaneously suggests foreignness and a neighborhood landmark that begins

to build the larger setting of the story. Ambiguous compression is the mode of Claudia's first sentence in the story itself.

The entire section is superabundant this way. Color appears over ten times in the first three pages, primarily autumnal colors such as brown, red, orange, and especially black. The narrator Claudia speaks largely as the child Claudia saw things, and most children characterize more by color than shape. From the background of our own childhood experience we are made to experience with young Claudia. This connection is accomplished in other ways also. Physical sensation, for instance, is a pervasive pattern, especially the contrast between cold and warmth. Morrison also evokes other tactile sensations, as in the description of Claudia's night-vomit, which

swaddles down the pillow onto the sheet -- green-gray, with flecks of orange. It moves like the insides of an uncooked egg. Stubbornly clinging to its own mass, refusing to break up and be removed. How, I wonder, can it be so neat and nasty at the same? (13).

The adult Claudia uses adult language to express the perceptions of the child while we are kept in the child's time by the use of present tense. The extended passage

around this takes us into two of the large image patterns of the section: language and seasons. Claudia's mother "is talking to the puke, but she is calling it by my name" (13). The child believe her mother despises her for her weakness in getting sick, only realizing much later that it is the illness that angers her. The adult Claudia wonders if it were all as painful as she remembers, and thinks it may have been, but "a productive and fructifying pain" (14), one which she recognized even then as love. Her mother's scolding is part of the verbal texture of her life. The adults around her are never silent for long, and her mother's rough tongue means less than her gentle hands: "So when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who does not want me to die." (14) Claudia's early life is in direct contrast to Pecola's, who has no one to speak to her with concern and no one to touch her gently. The best time she ever has is in this time Claudia describes, when she is a child welfare case placed in a real home for a while.

Claudia's other memory of autumn is that it is when Mr. Henry comes to be their boarder, a man who later molests Claudia's sister Frieda, but for whom "[e]ven after what came later, there was no bitterness in our memory" (17).

Such charity can be afforded, perhaps, because Frieda comes to little real harm. Unlike Pecola, she will not have to bear a child of incestuous rape. Again, we see twin versions of event, but not identical twins. The less serious makes the other seem even more devastating.

Mrs. MacTeeer's scolding is part of the sea of adult language that ebbs and flows around the MacTeer children. They feel disregarded, objectified: "Adults do not talk to us -- they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information." (12) Mr. Henry is loved and forgiven because he talks to them, notices them. The gossip of the adults is "like a gently wicked dance" (16), one described at length in terms of dance and feeling. Claudia and Frieda, only nine and ten, cannot know the meaning of all they hear, but they learn to "listen for truth in timbre" (26). They also learn the patterns of the language of the adults who have power in their lives, and how to survive the moods to which language gives the clue. Their own mother participates in the folk art of call-and-response gossiping, illustrated by three pages of dialogue that are all but music (14-16). Mrs. MacTeer also enters upon a long litany of misery that follows a pattern so familiar that they know its inevitable

progression:

My mother's fussing soliloquies always irritated and depressed us. They were interminable, insulting . . . extremely painful in their thrust. She would go on like that for hours . . . Then, having told everybody and everything off, she would burst into song and sing the rest of the day. But it was such a long time before the singing part came. (23)

Beautiful uses of language are less frequent than sadder uses, such as expulsion of choler, but language is clearly a power tool either way. Mrs. MacTeer may be releasing her own misery, but she is dumping it into the psyches of her girl-children: "But without song, those Saturdays sat on my head like a coal scuttle, and if Mama was fussing . . . it was like somebody was throwing stones at it." (24) The strong sensory quality of this image makes us participate in the helpless misery of childhood at the same time that we look back on it with the adult Claudia. We also discover how Claudia has learned the various uses of language, and which to value most highly.

Mrs. MacTeer's anger is set off by food, specifically Pecola's consumption of three quarts of milk a day. This is part of a series of food images that spans most of the book, eminently suitable to express the precarious existence of

black families piecing out a hardscrabble living at the tag-end of the Depression. After the dream-like opening, the balance of Claudia's first paragraph is taken up by a description of Rosemary Villanucci, the little white girl next door who sits in a newish car eating bread and butter, taunting the MacTeer girls with their hunger and her relative affluence. They long "to poke the arrogance out of her eyes and smash the pride of ownership that curls her chewing mouth" (12). This connects in turn to another major image pattern, that of eyes, especially as involved with anger and desire.

The eye pattern is also connected to the milk Pecola consumes in such quantities. She does so not because she's particularly hungry, but because she loves to drink from the MacTeers' Shirley Temple cup, complete with portrait of what Claudia calls "old squint-eyed Shirley" (19). Both Frieda (ten) and Pecola (eleven) covet the blue eyes of the white child, Pecola much more deeply because she has no family love to give her a grounding. Claudia at nine is young enough and secure enough in who she is to be resistant as yet to the pressure of society's approval. Instead of bowing to the forces that proclaim blue-eyed whiteness best, she

resists them with the same violence that makes her want to poke out the greedy eyes of Rosemary Villanucci. When a blue-eyed white baby doll is forced upon her, she dismembers it not for the sake of wanton destruction, but "To see of what it was made, to find the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me." (29) Her refusal to accept white beauty and power at its own valuation brings down the outrage of grown people, emanating from "The emotion of years of unfulfilled longing [that] preened in their voices." (21) At nine Claudia does not long to be a little white girl, but to destroy them: "The indifference with which I could have axed them was shaken only by my desire to do so." (22) The root anger is probably not so much against the white girls as against the entire order of society that proclaims them valuable and Claudia and her sister not. As she grows older she understands that this "disinterested violence" is "repulsive," and looks for a way to live beyond it. She moves "from pristine sadism to fabricated hatred, to fraudulent love," but comes to understand that "the change was adjustment without improvement" (22). In this passage Claudia reveals to us her blueprint for survival as a black

girl in a white world. Her understanding of the process is her salvation, her ability to put it into language her glory. As a result, she is easily the strongest person in The Bluest Eye, the one who brings understanding to the process of Pecola's diminishment. The fact that understanding and language are Claudia's twin strengths indicates the value they have for her creator.

Claudia's experience is the obverse of what happens to Pecola, who loses herself entirely in accepting the white ideal of beauty at face value. She never knows that there is value behind the eyes, under the skin, because there is no one in her family to teach her. Claudia's mother's complaining and scolding are miserable but not devastating, as they spring from her concern for her family, and sooner or later will surely change into song. "Misery colored by all the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all of the grief out of the words and left me with the conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet." (24) The arranged, ordered language that is music teaches Claudia that the way to survive pain and even prevail over it is to transmute it into sweetness on one's own terms. Pecola never has a chance to learn such a lesson in her household of

people buried alive in their own suffering.

Mrs. MacTeer's complaining voice drives the girls out of doors. This self expulsion is a pale ghost of the homeless condition to which Charlie has already reduced his family by setting the house afire. This temporary homelessness is itself a lesser version of what Charlie will eventually bring to his family: loss of identity as a family and for Pecola entire loss of the self. In doing so Charlie loses his humanity, becomes "indeed, an old dog, a snake, a ratty nigger" (19). When his daughter is forced out of doors in this lesser way, she too loses her humanity, her voice: "Suddenly Pecola bolted straight up, her eyes wide with terror. A whinnying sound came from her mouth." (25) Her period has started for the very first time and she is terrified, as well she should be, the way now being open to her ultimate destruction at the hands of her father. Mrs. MacTeer cannot know this, of course, and as she helps Pecola clean herself her daughters "hear the music of [their] mother's laughter" (28). This minor music is the last celebratory note of Pecola's short childhood. When she returns to the bosom of the Breedloves there will be no music.

The last note of Claudia's first section, the plaintive coda, is sounded when Pecola asks a question that Claudia has never had to consider: "'How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?'" (29). Frieda is asleep, Claudia doesn't know, and Pecola is left to face her future alone. This too illustrates an essential difference between the two girls, explaining why one will survive and one will not. Claudia has known love all her life, in forms both harsh and sublime. She is so close to it that she cannot see it except looking back as an adult. Pecola has never seen it at all, and will never get the chance to look back.

Again we have one image set against another, both heightened by the juxtaposition.⁴ Each mirrors the other, creating more total light. This is one of the basic uses of Claudia's narration. Another is the chance to show off language in several of its subtle avatars: the voices of children speaking as children do; the voice of a woman of exquisite sensibility looking back at her life; the cadences of some of the common permutations of language, such as the dialogue of gossip, the monologue of complaint; patterns of imagery that weave in and out of each other; metaphors that enliven with their exactness. This creates a melange of

sense and sensibility that is in essence something new:
 narrative designed to be experienced as much as understood.⁵

This design becomes even clearer in the second subsection of the "Autumn" section, the first spoken by the Jane-speaker. It is headed by a transfigured piece of the original Jane-talk passage:

HEREISTHEHOUSEITISGREENANDWH
 ITEITHASAREDDOORITISVERYPRETT
 YITISVERYPRETTYPRETTYPRETTYP
 (30).

Not only does the jammed lettering make this hard to decipher, it trails off into a parrot-like repetition of pretty. Dick and Jane's original house may be festive as a Christmas gift with green paint and a red door, but is sorely changed in this ironic little compression. The repetition, especially, seems like mindless chatter which refutes its own message. Compression and repetition, both common devices of poetry, are repeated throughout the entire subsection, which itself forms an entering wedge into the Breedlove world by means of the house they inhabit when Pecola returns home.

The colors of this section are gray and black, reflecting the depressive quality of the Breedloves' dwelling. The first phrase is "There is an abandoned store" (30), suggesting that there is nothing there worth keeping anymore. The last tenant of this desolate place before its abandonment was a cheap pizza parlor; before that at some point it was a Hungarian bakery; before that, a real estate office; and even before that it was the abode of gypsies. From the narrator's viewpoint, the Breedloves lived there in some far remote time even before the gypsies. Since we know from Claudia's introduction that 1941 is the main timeframe of this story, this reverse history moves the Jane-speaker into a time much closer to our own, which lends credibility to the words of this intelligence. This is also helped by the specific nature of the address, "the southeast corner of Broadway and Thirty-fifth Street in Lorain, Ohio" (30). We accept more readily that the Breedloves did indeed live there, "festering together . . . each making his own patchwork quilt of reality" (31). These are the only images in this section specifically used to describe the Breedloves as a family, and they are images of corruption and separation. The balance of the section describes the

Breedloves' furniture as an analog of the Breedloves' life, mainly through images of what vital life has not taken place, what memories have not been made. The sofa is singled out of the general misery, as it was bought new but arrived with a "split, which became a gash, which became a gaping chasm," leaving it "[l]ike a sore tooth" (32). This becomes especially apposite when we learn later that it is a bad tooth that leads to the end of the joy that once existed in the union of Cholly and Pauline Breedlove. "The only living thing in the Breedloves' house was the coal stove" (33), and even that is capricious. If it represents the possibility of warmth and vitality, we know right from the beginning that it is not to be counted on. Overall, Morrison uses place and things as signifiers of the quality of life that takes place in and around them -- as objective correlatives. Rather than just saying that the Breedloves are miserable, she makes us feel the pervasive, depressing quality of the misery.

In the third subsection of "Autumn" the Jane-talk epigraph is

HEREISTHEFAMILYMOTHERFATHER
 DICKANDJANETHEYLIVEINTHEGRE
 EENANDWHITEHOUSETHEYAREEVERYH
 (32).

Not only are the words squashed together the same way that the Breedloves fester together, the text stops abruptly short of saying that they are happy. Thus Morrison uses the very absence of language to create feeling, much as a rest frequently does in music. There is a deep implicit suggestion that no happiness is to be had in this family.

The words ugly and ugliness toll through the first paragraph no less than nine times, setting the tone for this glimpse of Breedlove family life: "No one could have convinced them that they were not relentlessly and aggressively ugly." (34) They have been made to feel ugly by forces generated by blackness, poverty, and despair. They deal with their feelings of inadequacy in different ways: Cholly by acting out viciously, Mrs. Breedlove by martyrdom, Sammy by hurting other people and running away. Pecola hides behind her feelings of ugliness, her very pain her only shield against more pain. She is so tentative, so self-effacing, that she is afraid to breathe when the usual early morning fight erupts between Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove. Twice she holds her breath and struggles between "an overwhelming wish that one would kill the other, and a

profound wish that she herself could die" (38). When the quarrel, as deadly and patterned as a bullfight, is finally over Pecola lets herself breathe again and prays, "'Please, God . . . Please make me disappear.'" (39) By pairing the constricted breathing with the desire for oblivion Morrison makes us feel the child's overstretched tension in our own bodies. Most children stiffen and hold their breath when they are miserable, and most of us have been miserable as children at least once. We also feel it when, in the face of God's silence, Pecola does her best to make herself disappear. Using a self hypnosis that amounts to incipient schizophrenia, she works her way through her body (and we with her), making it lose all outer awareness. She does her best to negate herself, another wish of unhappy children; even Tom Sawyer wishes to be dead temporarily. Pecola cannot, however, make this magic work on her "tight, tight eyes" (39), which are always left, as "Everything was there, in them." (39) It is not bodily pain that Pecola fears so much as the existential pain of living such a life with such people. She feels, as all damaged children do, that she deserves it, and thinks that it is because she is ugly. Every violent act around her (and they are legion) is a

violent act against her, because she has the sensitivity to feel the pain. Her very strength of compassion hurts her, and she feels that she does not deserve to exist as she is. She thinks that if her eyes, "those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights" (40), were different, then she herself would be different. Cholly and Mrs. Breedlove would call her "pretty-eyed Pecola" (40) and be solicitous of her. Somebody would love her.

At this point we find a whole new bit of Jane-talk, one which expresses the starry inner vision of Pecola's view of life with blue eyes:

Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes.
Run, Jip, run. Jip runs. Alice runs. Alice has blue
eyes. Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They
run with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty
blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes. Blue-like Mrs. Forrest's
blue blouse eyes. Morning-glory-blue-eyes.
Alice-and-Jerry-blue storybook eyes.

(40)

This bit of personal Jane-talk is pretty and free; and based on a delusional obsession. The Jane-speaker tells us how Pecola has prayed with all her being for a year for these eyes to be hers and make the world lovely and harmonious. She feels that as long as she is ugly, she will have to stay

with the Breedloves. To get away, she prays for this miracle, and is "not without hope" (40), but the speaker tells us flatly that she will always "see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (40). A graphic example of this occurs when Pecola ventures from her chamber of familial horror to the neighborhood candystore. As we go with her we see how sensitive she is, how aware of the world. She sees and loves the bright yellow dandelions for their color, the only bright color in this part except the phantom blue eyes. She experiences imaginatively the surface of the sidewalk, its gray smoothness and Y-shaped crack. She imagines the whirl of skates, hears the bell of the store, and dreams of the taste of the Mary Janes she has come to buy, the "resistant sweetness that breaks open at last to deliver peanut butter" (41). She is a living creature of the senses, but Mr. Yacobowski does not see her, because "for him there is nothing to see" (42). Pecola is aware of the vacuum where his curiosity should be, aware that it is based on contempt, and feels it must be contempt for her blackness, which is "static and dead" (42) in the midst of the living world she had shortly before carried within herself. She leaves the store with her candy and the

dandelions have turned ugly; her beholding eyes have turned ugly and all the world with them. The only respite from this pain and her ensuing anger lies in the immediate pleasure of the candy, "her nine lovely orgasms with Mary Jane" (43). Nine Mary Janes stare from nine wrappers, their "blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. . . . To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." (43) Rather than trying to make her body and pain disappear altogether, she forgets them for a while by centering on one small pleasure. Becoming Mary Jane, she is herself little girl lost. De Weever calls this "symbolic cannibalism" (406); it find its ironic counterpart later in Soaphead's symbolic cannibalism of young girls' breasts.

Apart from the MacTeers, who cannot help Pecola at home, the only people who seem to see Pecola at all are the whores who live above the Breedloves. Pecola loves China, Poland, and Miss Marie, and "They, in turn, did not despise her." (43) Pecola does not ask for much, and she does not get much. Still, this is her best place, a place where there is at least a semblance of life. Poland sings sweet sad songs, filled with soft colors and food images: "'His smile

is sorghum syrup drippin' slow-sweet'" (49). Language is also used for fun, as when China and Miss Marie play the dozens: "'You'd make a haint buy a girdle.'" (45) Food imagery is abundant in the speech of the whores. Miss Marie, the fat whore who loves food much better than men, calls Pecola "dumplin'" (44), "puddin'" (45), "sweetnin'" (46), and "chicken" (47). Her stories tend to dwell lovingly on food, and she makes Pecola see, hear, taste, and smell the food she describes. For Pecola, it is a vacation in a better world, -one of at least secondhand senses. The whores have no particular tendresse for her and do not treat her specially, but neither do they especially mistreat her. These are animalistic, profane women, willing to let Pecola prostitute herself if she wants, and they are the best friends she has.

Morrison ends the "Autumn" section with these sad women after showing us abundantly the inside and outside horrors of Pecola's everyday life. As with Pecola's deep compassion and her use of self effacement as a shield, her best escape is also a liability, as it is an escape to nowhere. These "whores in whores' clothing" (48), never young and never innocent, can do Pecola no good because they can do themselves no good. They represent survival at its most base

and physical, which will not be enough to save Pecola Breedlove from the maw of her own existence.

This first section of The Bluest Eye is easily the most densely packed part of the book in terms of language use, suggestiveness, and the creation of patterns of image. Its ambiguity, compression, and multiplicity partake of the intricacy of carefully crafted poetry. Everything is worth noticing, nothing is superfluous. Actual language is often used resoundingly, carrying more meanings than one. Both imagery and narrative devices add to a sense of doubling, of one thing clarifying and heightening another. A lot is compressed into a small space, and a great deal more is suggested rather than related outright.

At first glance the second section, "Winter," seems much more straightforward, as there are just two subsections, the first spoken by Claudia MacTeer and the other by the Jane-speaker. Both illuminate the general life of the people of Lorain as well as the specific life of Pecola Breedlove. Experiencing her life in a broader context adds greatly to our sense of her reality, as we identify even more with her when she is under outside attack. The reader empathizes with Pecola because she is so much alone.

This Claudia subsection, and all her others, is printed with a ragged righthand margin. This suggests that the adult Claudia is typing her own manuscript, forming her view of these past events as she goes. Such subtlety promotes our acceptance of her words as true and reliable, but it also points up that her words are those of a single human who has a vested interest in this past. This is markedly different from the Jane-speaker, who seems to be more corporate than individual, more chorus than solo. The Dick-and-Jane passages, especially, are reminiscent of a Greek chorus, prophesying as cryptically as a Delphic oracle and somehow summing up at the same time. Since Morrison leaves little to chance, it is fitting that it is a Greek hotel in which language is being made in the first sentence of the story proper.

Claudia's voice this time is a little different. Her verb tenses have changed from a mixture of present-in-the-past to a more simple grounding in the simple past. She is more clearly looking back to understand as opposed to re-living the past immediately. Our sympathies now lie with the woman who was the child rather than directly with the child. Her tone is more sophisticated, more openly speculative. Her

understanding seems to be building progressively, and ours along with it. Even the image patterns are simpler, less multifarious, and fewer in number. The main three are nature, eyes, and color. Food, bird and volcano imagery also form minor but effective patterns.

The nature imagery begins right away with Claudia's description of her father locked in mortal combat with winter, fighting to protect his children. There are more than ten separate winter images in the first paragraph, with language used allusively and metaphorically: "Wolf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked day and night to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills." (52) This is in stark contrast to Pecola's father, who, when last seen, was fighting viciously with Mrs. Breedlove because he refused to get fuel for their cold stove. Mr. MacTeer's life centers around his children's welfare; he is a "Vulcan guarding the flames" (52), teaching his children how to tend the family fire with care. The contrast with the Breedloves heightens Pecola's plight, especially with winter's stranglehold on life as underlying theme all through this subsection.

Eyes begin to appear right away as well. The fierce cold "melted our eyes" (52); the exotic new girl at school, Maureen Peal, has "sloe-green eyes" (53). When Pecola is teased by a gang of boys she covers her eyes with her hands (55), and when Frieda flies to her rescue she does so "with set lips and Mama's eyes" (55). When the boys back off it is because they see Frieda's fierce eyes, and are reluctant to go on under the "springtime eyes" and "watchful gaze" of Maureen Peal (55). One boy is so spooked that he walls his eyes (55). Eyes are mentioned three times in the short description of Claudia and Frieda seeing their father naked, moving from "wide" to "opened" to "open" (60). When Pecola is betrayed by Maureen's prurient interest, her eyes are "hinged" to Maureen's fleeing form, and she holds her misery in until it can "lap up into her eyes" (61). The eyes of Miss Marie remind Claudia of "waterfalls in movies about Hawaii" (64). Eyes are everywhere, their importance is constantly reinforced by this repetition. Even when Pecola's desire for blue eyes is not the obvious subject, it is always the subtext. Eyes signify the intelligence through which the world and self exist, and in Pecola's case a desire for escape from both.

Color is used here to establish a dichotomy between the grim winter world of the MacTeers and Breedloves and the cozy, comfortable world of Maureen Peal, privileged because she is rich and a "high-yellow dream child" (52). She is described in images so rich, colorful, and even succulent that one is reminded of Mary Janes. Her clothes are a rainbow of many colors, with "Kelly-green knee socks," "sweaters the color of lemon-drops," and a "brown velvet coat trimmed in white rabbit fur" (53). The knee socks make Maureen's legs look like "wild dandelion stems" (61), recalling the dandelions lost to Pecola's love by Mr. Yacobowski's contempt. Even Maureen's food is colorful, convolving two image patterns, and including "pink-frosted cupcakes, stocks of celery and carrots, proud, dark apples" (53). Her ice cream, the very symbol of her disdain for the MacTeers, is a deep royal purple that makes Claudia's eyes water (59), pulling a third element into this image entwinement. Conversely, there is almost no color in this part of the life of the MacTeers. The only time they get away from the grayness of winter and the blackness in the taunts of the boys and Maureen is when Mr. Henry's "light-green words restored color to the day" (62), when he gives

them money for a treat. Their world in winter is colorless and cheerless, and the false spring day that makes them hope to share the glowing colors of Maureen Peal ends in the blankness of falling snow.

As we have already noticed, food imagery gets entwined with color, and it serves much the same purpose: building contrast. While Maureen Peal eats "fastidious . . . dainty" lunches, the MacTeer girls eat "jelly-stained bread" (53). For breakfast they have "stewed prunes, slippery lumps of oatmeal, and cocoa with a roof of skin" (52). Maureen can afford all the ice cream she wants while they stand there with their tongues hanging out. When the MacTeers finally get money for a treat, it is because of a grown up's duplicity and limited by a fear of being further shamed by Maureen Peal. The food their mother leaves for them after school is boring graham crackers, crumbled rather than eaten. The only real power they can exert is to burn the pot of turnips intended for supper, and they may have to pay for that with a whipping. The implicit question is that if this is the best the MacTeers can do with all their effort, what nurturance is Pecola Breedlove getting? Even less than this bare minimum.

Pecola and both the MacTeer girls participate in the bird pattern, which begins when the MacTeers "moult immediately" when they emerge from school into the false spring day (54). The boys surrounding Pecola are described in terms of a flock of birds preening, stretching, and ganging up on a weaker bird. Pecola tries to break out of their circle like a helpless prey desperate for escape (55). When Maureen attacks her Pecola tucks her head in like a pigeon, "a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck" (60). When Maureen is at her meanest, Pecola "fold[s] into herself, like a pleated wing" (61). Although she too has been wounded by Maureen's perfidy, Claudia cannot bear this folding up and dying. She wants to "open her up, crisp her edges, ram a stick down that hunched and curving spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the streets" (61), but Pecola cannot do this, nor can Claudia do it for her. A contrast is established between righteous anger and hopeless misery, and we feel even more what it is to be Pecola Breedlove. Our own wings are clipped, our necks shortened.

Vulcan, of course, is the god of volcanoes, harnesser of fire and forger of fine tools. In some myths he teaches

his creative power to mortals, much as Mr. MacTeer teaches his children. Pecola has no such teacher, and her connection with volcanoes is to be the sacrifice to those that burn inside the boys who taunt her. These boys have taken their "exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness, and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn," which has "spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path" (55). Pecola has the misfortune to be these boys' scapegoat because she is helpless. She only escapes because the MacTeers defend her, empowered by their family foundation. It is no accident that at the end of this subsection Claudia is using her graham cracker crumbs to build a volcano, which she breaks up at will (68). Although the young Claudia might not know it, Claudia the narrator is fully aware that her family was her powerbase, and that Pecola had none.

All the image patterns of this subsection work toward building an infrastructure of contrast between Pecola Breedlove's life and that of Claudia and Frieda MacTeer. The advent of Maureen Peal provides even greater contrast, as the reader learns that the only help available for Pecola is two very young girls. We know with the foredoomed prescience

of Greek tragedy that this will not be enough to save her in the end. For all their caring, Claudia and Frieda are thin shields against the winds of fate.

This subsection also shows us Pecola in a wider setting than before. We have previously seen that she is abused at home, disregarded by her closest neighbors, and scorned in her neighborhood. We now know that school is no haven for her either. The loop seems to be tightening around little Pecola, and the next subsection draws it even tighter. It is narrated by the Jane-speaker and opens with

SEETHECATITGOESMEOWMEOWCOM
EANDPLAYCOMEPLAYWITHJANETHE
KITTENWILLNOTPLAYPLAYPLAYPLA
(67).

This garbled invitation to the cat to come and play is refused and trails off into repetition that sounds like a wistful echo or stuck record. Pecola's situation only gets worse in broader context, this time of the social aspirations and expectations of adults in her town.

At first this subsection does not seem to have much to do with Pecola, as it delineates certain respectable black women who reject their blackness in favor of approval by the

white power structure. The origins of these women are often rural and southern. At first they are sensual, especially in their language: "they tilt their heads and say 'Mobile' and you think you've been kissed . . . They say 'Nagadoches' and you want to say 'Yes, I will.'" (67) They are compared to hollyhocks in an extended metaphor, and have natural eyes that "can tell what time it is by the color of the sky" (67): eyes that "do not bite" (68). They are very good with flowers such as rooster combs, sunflowers, bleeding heart, ivy and mother-in-law tongue, and are generous with downhome foods such as watermelon and snapbeans (67). In short, they are natural women living in the natural world until they develop a desire to rid themselves of the "dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (68). They become dry sticks who only tolerate sex with their husbands, who give their children care but not love, and whose only love is given to a safe recipient like a cat. Their flowers become paper flowers, and they are lost to their families.

It is Pecola's bad luck to happen into the home of one of these ultra-respectable women, Geraldine, mother of

Louis, Junior.⁶ Junior lures Pecola into the house because he needs to take his anger at his mother out on somebody, and "More and more Junior enjoyed bullying girls." (72) In Junior's mind Pecola is especially fair game because she is "a very black girl" and because "Nobody ever played with her . . . because she was ugly" (72). Pecola loves the house because it is the kind of dream she too could have under other circumstances, and she especially admires the paper flowers on the frame of the colored picture of Jesus. Her dream is broken when Junior throws a big black cat into her face; his mother's special pet, of course. Pecola cries from the scratches and shock, but becomes fascinated with the cat: "The blue eyes in the black face held her." (74) She makes friends with the cat until Junior comes back into the room. Outraged by their mutual affection, he swings the cat around his head by one foot, "its eyes blue streaks of horror" (74). He throws it against the window, where it lies with "its blue eyes closed, leaving only an empty, black, and helpless face" (75). The object of Pecola's identification and admiration has been obliterated. At this point Geraldine comes home, takes one look at Pecola, and blames it all on her. Geraldine sees in her all funky little

black girls everywhere, and the threat that she herself might have to admit to being black. When she sees Pecola she sees all the ill bred, uncared for children who

stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything. Unblinking and unabashed, they stared up at her. The end of the world lay in their eyes, and the beginning, and all the waste in between. (75)

Geraldine cannot face that reality, cannot answer those questions, and she rejects Pecola with a vicious dismissal: "'Get out. . . . You nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house.'" (75) Pecola runs and the last thing she sees is Jesus looking down at her from his nest of paper flowers "with sad and unsurprised eyes" (76).

Eye, flower, and nature imagery are the dominant patterns in this subsection, accompanied by the metalanguage of the opening. Together they represent variations on themes that have already been established, but are perpetuated here. The narrative tone starts out as gently speculative, grows more polemic along the way, and finally lets Pecola's pain show itself in action, not discussion. Narrationally, this section is shaped like a broad funnel that narrows to the point of annihilating Pecola Breedlove. Yet again she

suffers for someone else's shortcomings, as she has for those of the boys on the playground who reject their own blackness, Mr. Yacobowski's inability to see blackness, and the whores' general indifference. None of these shortcomings were chosen by their owners so much as visited upon them by the forces of history and society, but that does not help Pecola any. We have also glimpsed what Pecola's family can do to her, and we already know that they will do much more. Perhaps they too have been formed by the forces of history and society. In any case, both Claudia's story and the Jane-speaker's march us forward into the worse night we know is coming. Dramatic irony is one of the mainsprings of this book's effect, and our foreknowledge engenders dread. We know Pecola will be damaged, but we don't know just how it happens, and if we will be able to bear it. This becomes increasingly difficult, building to a crescendo in the next section.

Dread dominates the third section, "Spring," an intensely ironic title. The time of universal hope becomes the time of dissolution and we watch it every step of the way. There are four subsections, the first narrated by Claudia and the other three by the Jane-speaker. Claudia

provides another contrastive tale, and the other subsections show us why the mother, the father, and even the dog will not play.

Claudia begins with a pretty image of the natural world in spring: "The first twigs are thin, green, and supple. They bend into a complete circle, but will not break." (78) This hopeful image, seemingly analogous to childhood, dissolves into pure pain when we find that it means "only a change in whipping style. They beat us differently in the spring." (78) The sharp little switches of spring make the girls look back nostalgically at the dull, predictable pain of leather straps or hairbrushes. Since Morrison's natural world mirrors that of humans so closely, our dread expands accordingly.

Lilac and forsythia hold no cheer, nor does the faded dress with tiny bunches of wild roses that covers the quivering form of Frieda, whom Claudia finds awash in tears. She has been molested by Mr. Henry, who has touched her "tiny breasts that, like two fallen acorns, scattered a few faded rose leaves on her dress" (79). The natural world is not being much help to the MacTeer girls; burgeoning only brings them pain. This episode ends in a fairly comic

denouement, which points up even more how serious Pecola's predicament will be when she is raped by her father. The MacTeer girls are relatively safe and able to hang onto their essential innocence because they have parents who care for them. It is Pecola's very parents who bring the worst trouble down on her.

Frieda and Claudia go to Pecola's house, but no one is home except for Miss Marie sitting on the upstairs porch. She is the center of all of the eye imagery and most of the color that appear in Claudia's tale. Her colors are warm browns and she is compared subtly to a tree. When she laughs at the children "the laughter fall[s] like a wash of red leaves all around" (83). This big, hearty woman attracts Claudia because her smile is "full, not like the pinched holding-back smile of other grown-ups" (83). Despite her lifestyle there seems to be something vivid and compelling about her. When she is happy her eyes are "as clean as rain" (82), and those same "rain-soaked eyes" can light up (83). However, when she feels insulted the waterfalls become still and only start up again when she amuses herself by tossing a beer bottle at the girls and scaring them (83). Whatever is so alive in her is not predictable, not to be depended upon.

No help for anyone is to be had here, let alone Pecola.

The girls look for Pecola at the house of the rich white people for whom her mother works, in the part of town where the "sky was always blue" (84). Mrs. Breedlove is in her element here, has picked up shininess as her "skin glow[s] like taffeta in the reflection of white porcelain, white woodwork, polished cabinets, and brilliant copperware" (86). She has borrowed whiteness from her workplace, shed some of her oppressive black ugliness. This is what she loves. This becomes apparent when a pink and blonde child appears, Pecola accidentally spills a hot blueberry pie, and her mother attacks Pecola and comforts the white child. Mrs. Breedlove backhands Pecola, slaps her again, and abuses her with words "hotter and darker than the smoking berries" (87). She runs the black children off and whispers comfort to the "little pink-and-yellow girl . . . [with] honey in her words" (87). The adult Claudia makes no comment on this scene, and, indeed, what else is there to say? It's another nail in Pecola's emotional coffin.

Claudia's story this time is fairly straightforward reportage. Images, especially color, are used sparingly for effect. Commentary is held to a minimum. We are not drawn

into experience by subtle devices so much as shown the situation and left to our own devices to find compassion. Events speak for themselves. The anger we feel toward Mrs. Breedlove is our own, and it is deep.

We expect that anger to continue when the epigraph to the next subsection alerts us that it will concern Mrs.

Breedlove:

SEEMOTHERMOTHERISVERYNICEMO
 THERWILLYOUPPLAYWITHJANEMOTH
 ERLAUGHSLAUGHMOTHERLAUGHLA
 (88).

Irony seems certain here, because we have just seen Mrs. Breedlove flaying her daughter alive, have also seen her at war with her husband, and feel she is not nice at all. We cannot imagine her laughing, nor anyone suggesting she laugh. We assume her current nature is the way she has always been, and we could not be more wrong. The irony this time comes from our misplaced judgment rather than from a turn in the plot or the minimizing tone of Jane-talk. Morrison's ground-shifting adds an element of surprise, keeps us on our toes as readers. Nothing can be taken for granted, and especially not judgments about people made from

only one point of view, one place in time. Full humanity is the human birthright, true for Pecola's mother as well as Pecola, and we are not to forget that.⁷

The Jane-speaker's narrative method changes from the usual here also. Omniscient exposition is interspersed with the words of Mrs. Breedlove herself.⁸ In being allowed to speak for herself, she becomes infinitely more real to us as a person. We hear her personal history from her own mouth in raw, ragged human terms, presented in italics with quotation marks around each section of her speech, and printed with an uneven righthand margin. These presentational details lend a subtle verisimilitude, which is greatly enhanced by comparison with the outside, impartial view of her existence presented by the omniscient narrator. This narrator does not call her Mrs. Breedlove, as even her children and husband do. She is simply Pauline, originally Pauline Williams, once a person in her own right, not just the wife of Cholly and mother of Pecola and Sammy. The narrator attempts to present her life without bias, and free from the strictures of her current roles.

Pauline was once one of those sweet southern girls that Geraldine, mother of Junior, had also been, and like

her has undergone a great sea-change. The origin, nature, and effect of that change is largely the subject matter of this subsection, which begins with Pauline's birth family "on a ridge of red Alabama clay seven miles from the nearest road" (88). She is the ninth of eleven children, and would have been lost in the shuffle, the only child without even a nickname, if not for an early injury to her foot that left it limp and archless. That foot is her most outwardly defining characteristic, but inside she has a passion for order that fuels her life. She organizes what she can in the physical world, and uses her observation skills to try to make order of her experiential world as well. Color imagery is part of her entire way of being, indicating a talent for living that we might never suspect if not taken into her mind directly. She has both a talent and a passion for color and order, each complementing the other, as the two parts of this narrative complement each other, one part directly passionate, the other informative. Pauline is a natural poet in her speech as well as her viewpoint, with many lines falling into scannable verse. She uses strong visual and sensory images, cadences that reflect the subject matter, repetition for effect, metaphors that enlighten, and other

poetic techniques in a way that is not self conscious. Her grammar and diction are those of a black woman of her class and time. She is just talking as she talks, but the way she talks teaches us what she is inside, underlining the overriding importance of language as the human medium. Morrison invents Pauline as a complete person in great measure through the words ascribed directly to her. The fact that we cannot imagine to whom Pauline would ever be speaking these words, or under what conditions, makes it all the more poignant, as it highlights the fact that she has no confidant, no friend. In this she is like Pecola. Indeed, we find that she is like Pecola in many ways, not least in her sensitivity to color and beauty. When her folks move to Kentucky to find work, her emblem for home becomes the streak of green light that a firefly makes when it lights on a tree leaf. This glowing, organic image stays in her mind all her life, and the "june bug," as she calls it with an appropriate seasonal tie-in, becomes her touchstone for all that is desirable and natural. When she first sees Cholly, this color and more rise up in her. She remembers berry picking in her Sunday dress, and how the whole dress was "messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the

dress nor me. I could feel that deep purple inside me." (92)

Ironically, this passionate, human image reminds the reader of the hot berries splattering on Pecola's legs, and later will be enchained to an image symbolic of the loss of Cholly's manhood. This sort of patterning also occurs as Pauline remembers the cool, yellowish lemonade her mother made for her father, along with the streaks of green the june bugs made in the trees. Not only does she repeat this combination several times in this subsection, it also recalls the dandelions Pecola loves so much for their color, of which she is robbed; and the green knee socks that make Maureen Peal's legs look like dandelion stems, and her sweater like a lemon drop. Yellow and green seems to be the family color combination that is lost as soon as it is found, as Pecola loses Maureen's friendship the hour it seems to blossom. In any case, Pauline thinks she has found the source of all color-feeling when she finds Cholly: "it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together. . . . He used to whistle, and when I heerd him, shivers come on my skin."

(92) In a rare lyrical flight of language, the Jane-speaker also makes it clear that Cholly's advent was one of power

and glory:

He came, strutting right out of a Kentucky sun on the hottest day of the year. He came big, he came strong, he came with yellow eyes, flaring nostrils, and he came with his own music. . . . She could not stop her laughter -- not until he looked up at her and she saw the Kentucky sun drenching the yellow, heavy-lidded eyes of Cholly Breedlove.

(91)

Such sensual imagery clashes with what we know of Cholly Breedlove so far, and that's the point: where did it all get lost?

In their youth and strength, Cholly and Pauline come north to Lorain, Ohio, and things begin to go wrong for the first time. Pauline is lonely and bored, grows too dependent. Cholly pulls away, she pulls back, and the fight is on: "Their marriage was shredded with quarrels." (94) Cholly starts to drink, Pauline starts to work for white folks, and almost leaves Cholly at the insistence of one of her employers: "But later on it didn't seem none too bright for a black woman to leave a black man for a white woman." (95) They practice marital tug of war until Pauline becomes pregnant, when Cholly eases up a little on his drinking and running around. Pauline stops work and starts going to the

movies to ease her loneliness. There she is exposed to the omnipotence of romantic love and physical beauty, which the narrator calls "the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought [as] both originated in envy, thrived in insecurity, and ended in disillusion." (97) This is certainly the case for Pauline, who wants to look like Jean Harlow and be loved by Clark Gable, but instead loses a front tooth on candy and becomes the butt of Cholly's teasing. The wars recommence, and she has Sammy, but wants more of something to love, and becomes pregnant on purpose with Pecola. While she is carrying this baby, she has a rich relationship with her and talks to her in the womb:

Like good friends we was. You know. I be hanging wash and I knowed lifting weren't good for it. I'd say to it holt on now I gone hang up these few rags, don't get froggy; it be over soon. It wouldn't leap or nothing. (98)

After being grossly insulted in the hospital by being compared to a foaling mare, Pauline delivers the actual Pecola, who is a disappointment:

I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly.
(100).

Pauline is too blinded by the dissolution of her own dreams to take care of her children's spirits. She provides for their bodies as best she can, accepting the role of major breadwinner in the house. Cholly has less power as she assumes more, and finally she ends up where we first met her: "Holding Cholly as a model of sin and failure, she bore him like a crown of thorns, and her children like a cross." (100) Thus we have traveled her path almost to where we left her in the Fishers' kitchen, reviling her own child for the sake of another. How could even her sadly diminishing dreams bring her to such a pitch? Because the Fishers can give her what she wants, what she has wanted since she was a child: order and beauty. And there is no room here for a child of hers. For her to be "an ideal servant" (100), with "Power, praise, and luxury" and even a nickname, she has to keep "this order, this beauty, for herself, a private world" (101). She excludes her children from her real life, which is described in a page and a half by the narrator in terms so colorful and rich that housework seems a thing of real beauty; as indeed it is for Pauline, but only at the Fishers'. Her own children live in an ugly, unkempt house,

strongly contrasting with the Fishers, and are raised in "fear of being clumsy, fear of being like their father, fear of not being loved by God . . . into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life." (102).

All this fear is the result of Pauline's own sad experience of life. She transmits her disappointment to her children in her very milk, and Pecola learns from the expression on her mother's face that she must be ugly. All the later harsh lessons are reinforcements of that first teaching, and come as no surprise since she has never known anything else. Pauline's own dissolution was there from the beginning as well, in her own sense of anonymity and being of no account even within her family. The narrator tells us that in her teenage years she longed for rescue and looked to religion, mixing her natural sexual urges with the promises of fundamental religion, resulting in a longing for "a simple Presence, an all-embracing tenderness with strength and a promise of rest" (90). Cholly seems to be this someone, "the Stranger who knew" (90), and she casts her lot entirely with him. He gradually disappoints her, and the final straw is the loss of her toooth, the very

emblem of Pauline's diminishment, and Pecola's. Indeed, the decay and loss of the tooth are an extended metaphor for the plot progression of The Bluest Eye:

And then she lost her front tooth. But there must have been a speck, a brown speck easily mistaken for food but which did not leave, which sat on the enamel for months, and grew, until it cut into the surface and then the brown putty underneath, finally eating away to the root, but avoiding the nerves, so its presence was not noticeable or uncomfortable. Then the weakened roots, having grown accustomed to the poison, responded one day to severe pressure, and the tooth fell free, leaving a ragged stump behind. But even before the little brown speck, there must have been the conditions, the setting that would allow it to exist in the first place. (92-3)

Rather than telling us again what happens in this story, Morrison now tells us how, and maybe therefore why. Here we are told that the final evil of this book, the incestuous rape and ensuing madness of Pecola Breedlove, has its origins in seemingly insignificant events: the denial of crayons to a little girl, the loss of a pregnant woman's front tooth. In whatever makes Cholly's wife teach their children "fear of madness like Cholly's mother" (102); in the other things about Cholly we cannot know yet. These "weakened roots" cause the tooth to fall, the child to be assaulted, the madness to find the way open. But there is

also the setting that would allow this to happen in the first place, which refers broadly to the condition of poor people with no parity of opportunity, especially poor black people under the weight of centuries of oppression. Using this sort of emblematic compression as a poetic technique stretches all the way back to Spenser and "The Faerie Queene," of course, but Morrison makes frequent use of it throughout her work.

Since Cholly will be the subject of the next subsection, it is fitting that he is the object of Pauline's last reverie in this one. She thinks about why she must stay with him, why she doesn't just take her kids and leave. It is largely for the sake of how he used to be, his "big black arms thrown back behind his head, the muscles like great big peach stones sanded down, with veins running like little swollen rivers down his arms." (102) Cholly was once capable of making love that was real love, as when he tickled her foot and kissed her leg that first day in Kentucky. Long after their marriage he could still make tender love: "All my strength is in his hand. My brain curls up like wilted leaves." (104) Pauline's evocation of his bringing her to orgasm is lyrical, sensual, and powerful:

I begin to feel those little bits of color floating up into me -- deep in me. That streak of green from the june-bug light, the purple from the berries trickling along my thighs, Mama's lemonade yellow runs sweet in me. Then I feel like I'm laughing between my legs, and the laughing gets all mixed up with the colors . . . And it be rainbow all inside . . .

(103-4).

It has not been like that between them for a long time at the time of the story, and Pauline has transferred her faith to Jesus as the Stranger who will know. But her faith brings her no joy, nor any to her husband and children. We are left wondering what, besides Pauline, happened to Cholly.

That curiosity seems fated to be satisfied, as the next subsection begins with

SEEFATHERHEISBIGANDSTRONGFATH
ERWILLYOUPLAYWITHJANEFATHER
ISSMILINGSMILEFATHERSMILESMILE

(105).

Knowing what we already know about Cholly and Pecola, we do not trust that smile. We cannot help but feel that it is ironic, even smirking. What is there for such a father to smile about? This passage piques our interest not because we cannot imagine Cholly smiling, like Mrs. Breedlove, but because we do not want him to smile. His play with Pecola-

Jane is nothing to smile about, and we do not want to understand how a man could commit such a deed. There can be no excuse, no reason, for a man to sink so low.

The first sentence knocks us off our judgmental perch: "When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junkheap by the railroad." (105) From here we find out that everything in Cholly's life has been a devolution, a decaying spiral, toward the moment of spiritual dissolution when he forces himself on his child. Pecola's life is much the same sort of spiral, only hers is a mirror image, as her journey has been to the point where her father can and will violate her. Everything in her life makes her ready for this, powerless against it, as each outrage against her builds on the one before it. We have experienced the building blocks of her half of this foul double helix: the constant violations of her humanity. We know that Cholly drinks and mistreats his family, but these are symptoms of deeper malaise as well as malaise itself. To diagnose the real disease we need to understand Cholly's personal history much better; that is the purpose of this subsection.

Cholly Breedlove's name is not even his own, but a hand-me-down from the dead brother of his Great Aunt Jimmy, who raises him down in south Georgia when his crazy mother runs away after trashing her baby. This Great Aunt Jimmy is a very old lady, but she takes care of him as best she can, even if her habits and age do make her a little repulsive to him. She dies when he is about thirteen, and he runs away to find the father he never even thought to ask about until the fourth grade, one Samson Fuller. After a long struggle, he finds Samson in an alley in Macon, engrossed in losing his money in a crap game. He has no time for Cholly, who is so nervous he is unable to remember his mother's name, let alone announce himself as Fuller's son. When Cholly tries again to speak to him, Fuller reviles him nastily and Cholly runs away in abject mortification. He is nearly slain by his grief and disappointment, and feels all alone in the world. Some kindly whores take him in, restore his manhood as best they can, and send him out into the world with nothing left to lose. This constitutes a kind of freedom, which he forfeits when he mortgages his future to Pauline Williams, and settles down into stultifying, soul-killing sameness. He drinks because that is the only way he knows to shut out the

deathly life he has chosen by falling prey to a tenderness he does not know how to sustain. That same sort of misguided tenderness, mixed with the old anguish and anger, is the source of his ruination of his child.

Written out in bare bones prose like this, no one could understand Cholly's trespasses. It is the essence of Morrison's art that these bones are fleshed out by the language she puts into the mouth of the Jane-speaker, who in this part is at once straightforward and lyrical: the blended voice of narrative and poetry. For instance, Aunt Jimmy is not just an old lady, she is one of a veritable choir of old ladies, whose "voices blended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain. Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain." (109) These old ladies were not always old ladies, but young once, with "slim black necks . . . like nothing other than a doe's. Their laughter had been more touch than sound." (109) They were also mature women, whose amazing strength and capability are described in an series of anatomical synecdoches both strong and beautiful (109-110). In old age these same women are "in fact and at last, free." (110) They have nothing left to lose, nothing left to take,

and can walk through their worlds with impunity. Their strength comes down to their voices, which can "chatter," sing a "lullaby of grief," and resolve into the "pleasant notes of a mouth organ" (110). At Aunt Jimmy's funeral, Cholly is fascinated by "the creamy conversations," of which we are given an excellent example (111-113), recalling the call-and-response gossiping of Mrs. MacTeer. Language, voice, and sound are mentioned throughout Cholly's history, with synaesthesia between sound and other senses occurring several times.

The major image pattern which stitches this entire history together is that of eyes. They are mentioned nearly thirty times, in every context from the cold dead eye of Aunt Jimmy to the eyes of God to the wandering eyes of Darlene to the "pleading eyes, cold eyes, eyes gone flat with malice, others laced with fear" of the men dicing with his father (122). When Fuller rejects him, Cholly pours all his own energy into "pulling every nerve and muscle into service to stop the fall of water from his eyes. While straining in this way, focusing every erg of energy on his eyes, his bowels suddenly opened up" and Cholly soils himself in public out of sheer grief and loss (124). When he

runs away to hide in the deepest shadow of a pier, he remains "knotted there in fetal position, paralyzed, his fists covering his eyes, for a long time. No sound, no sight, only darkness and heat and the press of his knuckles on his eyelids." (124) His attack on Pecola is preceded by a welter of emotions, including

What could a burned-out black man say to the hunched back of his eleven-year-old daughter? If he looked into her face, he would see those haunted, loving eyes. The hauntedness would irritate him -- the love would move him to fury. How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do about that? Return it? (127)

The pity is that he can't return it. He doesn't know much about love because he has so seldom encountered any. Even his wife loves an ideal she has in her head rather than a man with desires and imagination that require tending.

Cholly's best friend ever is an old man he works with before Aunt Jimmy's death. Blue Jack tells Cholly "old-timey stories" and ghost stories, and they talk about women and fights and how Blue "talked his way out of getting lynched once, and how others hadn't" (106). Blue creates the world and orders it for Cholly through the medium of words, in direct contrast to Pauline as a child, who was "enchanted by

numbers and depressed by words." (89) This difference in ordering principles is one of the major reasons for their failure to communicate, and opens their way downward. The importance of language in Cholly's early life is yet more evidence of its vast importance in Morrison's belief system. Cynthia Davis supports this when she says that "Power for Morrison is largely the power to name, to define reality and perception." (323)

The narrator says flatly that "Cholly loved Blue" (106), the only time we are told that Cholly loves anything, including his wife and children. Cholly and Blue Jack share the best time Cholly ever has, his touchstone of memory that is comparable to Pauline's streaks of green. They attend a church picnic and are nearby when a family breaks open their watermelon on a sharp rock. The father rearing up with the large watermelon "looked taller than the trees to Cholly, and the melon blotted out the sun " (106). Cholly thinks at first he looks like God, but recalls that God "was a nice old white man . . . with . . . little blue eyes that looked sad when people died and mean when they were bad." (106) So he figures that this black man with his family's wellbeing in his hands must be the devil, "holding the world in his

hands, ready to dash it to the ground and spill the red guts so niggers could eat the sweet, warm insides. If the devil looked like that Cholly preferred him." (106-7) When he gives sway to his appetite for Pecola it is partly because "the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him" (128), echoing back to this glimpse of power. When it is slammed open the red heart of the watermelon breaks free, and the father gives it to Blue and the boy to eat: "Together the old man and the boy sat on the grass and shared the heart of the watermelon. The nasty-sweet guts of the earth." (107) This joy is the best Cholly ever has, because the watermelon is "Blood red, its planes dull and blunted with sweetness, its edges rigid with juice. Too obvious, almost obscene, in the joy it promised." (107) This mixture of sweet and obscene, power and deviltry, is a foretaste of Cholly's state of mind when he violates his daughter: "He put his mouth down and nibbled at the back of her leg. His mouth trembled at the first sweetness of the flesh. He closed his eyes, letting his fingers dig into her waist." (128) Sweet, obscene, violent. Both these images are enchained with that of Cholly first meeting Pauline, when he also kisses a foot and nibbles at a leg. Indeed, he has that time confused with

the time with Pecola, as his memories of Pauline are part of what excites him about his daughter. He is conflicted as a burnt-out man because he was conflicted as an ill-cherished child. His one time of strength between these extremes is when he allows himself to feel "a wondering softness . . . a tenderness, a protectiveness" (128) and brings the semblance of love into the life of Pauline. The passing urge is not enough to sustain a shared reality between Cholly and Pauline, nor between Cholly and Pecola. In both cases he gives in to his appetite for instant gratification and ongoing lust for forbidden power, both of which have seeds in the red heart of that watermelon.

It takes more than one mixed epiphany to shape a man's life, and the narrator tells of two other episodes that make Cholly what he is. The first of these occurs during Aunt Jimmy's funeral banquet. Cholly, his cousin Jake, and two girls take a flirtation walk down to a wild muscadine vineyard. They eat their fill of the purple grapes and then pelt each other with them until the white cotton dress of Cholly's girl Darlene is stained with the purple juice. So far this is a happy reminder of Pauline's best dress stained with purple berry juice, itself an ironic reminder of

Pecola's legs burned by the purple juice of hot cobbler. Cholly and Darlene grope their way into mutually satisfying sex, but are interrupted at the pitch of events by two white hunters, who shine their flashlights on Cholly's busy behind. Cholly and Darlene cease their activity, but are forced to simulate completion by the two powerful white men with "long guns" (117). Cholly pretends to do so with "a violence born of total helplessness" (117). He hates Darlene because she witnesses his lack of power, his humiliation: "He almost wished he could do it -- hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much." (117) They have to endure this mocking audience, who laugh at them openly, call them "nigger" and "coon baby" (117-18). Cholly is in a helpless rage as "The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile." (117) This symbolic bugging is an emotional castration and destroys what slight manliness Cholly has managed to find at thirteen. He cannot hate the hunters directly because "such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were, big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless." (119) All he can do is hate the "one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to

spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight." (119) This same misplaced, aggressive anger resurges much later when he looks at his helpless little girl hunched over the sink and wonders how she dares to love him, what he could ever do for her "that would earn him his own respect, that would in turn allow him to accept her love? His hatred of her slimed in his stomach and threatened to become vomit." (127) The pattern established by the casual humiliation by the white hunters is one in which Cholly is stuck fast for the rest of his life, and his wife and children along with him. This is part of the inner rot that allows the tooth to fall.

To heal this psychic kick to the testicles, Cholly goes looking for his long-gone father, with the results we have already noted. He is utterly unmanned by his father's casual but vicious rejection, and receives the worst hurt of his life by his father's agency; as his daughter will by his. He looks to his father for existence: "there were indeed his eyes, mouth, his whole head . . . his voice, his hands -- all real. They existed, really existed, somewhere. Right here." (122) Instead, his father negates him and sends him roaring into infantile regression. When Cholly rapes his

daughter, she becomes unconscious, and then marooned in the isolated world of schizophrenia. It may seem that Cholly returns to ordinary life, but actually he never does. He becomes a free person of sorts: "Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him." (126) It is only his perceptions and appetite that interest him when hatred overrides residual tenderness, and he rapes his daughter. Cholly may be unexcusable, but he is not inexplicable. His path is indeed the same painful downward spiral as his daughter's; hers is just shorter because the freight of all the antique hurts are heaped onto her load, causing her disintegration to pick up speed and momentum. The sins of the father are visited upon the child, as well as the sins of the mother and all those who ever harmed any of the three; and the sins of those who harmed the harmers. The way of all flesh stretches back into infinity, but stops for Pecola on that kitchen floor. She is the scapegoat who has to pay the price for everybody.

After the searing intensity of Cholly Breedlove's history, the next subsection seems to start off funny:

SEETHEDOGBOWBOWGOESTHEDOG
 DOYOUWANTTOPLAYDOYOUWANT
 TOPLAYWITHJANESEETHEDOGRUNR
 (130).

Then we notice that this is even more incoherent than most Jane-talk, and a sense of dread sets in. We have seen what happened with the cat, the mother, the father. We wonder what Morrison is holding in reserve, how much worse it could possibly get for Pecola, and begin to mentally tiptoe into this story that starts with mock innocence: "Once there was an old man who loved things" (130). Our dread seems justified when this is finished "for the slightest contact with people produced in him a faint but persistent nausea." (130) We seem to have moved from people flawed by circumstance to a person who rejects humanity in toto, and indeed this is the case. The story of Soaphead Church is told in a nonlyrical, flat-toned voice that conveys horror all the better for not telegraphing attitude ahead of event. Unlike the personal histories of Pauline and Cholly, Soaphead Church's life and character are drawn in a dispassionate voice shorn of imagery, lyricism, shift in point of view, or any other thing that would shade our view

of him. The irony in this section is how thoroughly we come to see him as he sees himself, and how totally mad his view of himself is.

This seems like the cat story in starting a long way from Pecola Breedlove, but it also ends like the cat story as once again a vicious blow is struck with Pecola as the anvil. Before that happens we have some seven pages of the history of Soaphead which show us both who he is and who he thinks he is. We can distinguish between the two only by careful attention, and only this same attention keeps us from buying into his subtle rationalizations and pseudo-logical defense of his life choices. Flatly put, he is a girl-child molester who pretends to have mediumistic powers for his own gain. He washed up in Lorain in 1931 after rejecting and fleeing from all real life. He was once married to Velma, a warm natural woman who wouldn't stand his essential coldness and revulsion towards life. She left him because she refused "to spend her life in the soundless cave of Elihue's mind" (134). Elihue may be this way because he is the end-product of a long line of denatured black West Indians who have made it a point to marry up, "lightening the family complexion and thinning out the family features"

(133). In their unnatural pride, the Whitcombs finally take to marrying each other, and either because of that, or the "original genes of the decaying lord" (133) who founds the family whiteness, several "flukes" (133) are born, including Elihue, who runs so hard from life. He ends up in Lorain posing as a seer by default, and is given his new name by the citizens of the town. He has steady work, as "His business was dread. People came to him in dread, whispered in dread, wept and pleaded in dread. And dread was what he counseled." (136) He assists people in whatever their desire is, good or evil, and has a sophistic philosophy that justifies anything he wants to do:

Evil existed because God had created . . . an imperfect universe . . . God had done a poor job, and Soaphead suspected that he himself could have done better. It was in fact a pity that the Maker had not sought his counsel. (136)

We see how far gone he is from this, and indeed he is thinking about his better plan the afternoon that Pecola comes to see him, "her hands folded across her stomach, a little protruding pot of tummy." (137) We know that she is pregnant from Cholly, and that she must be at the end of her rope, as she has come to ask Soaphead to give her blue eyes.

He understands the request, understands that she wants to be beautiful, "A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes." (137) For the first time, he really wishes he could work a miracle, and decides that maybe he can, in a way.'

The only disordering factor in Soaphead's narrow life is Bob, his landlady's old dog who sleeps on his porch. He is "revolted by Bob and wished he would hurry up and die." (135) He uses Pecola's wish to have his own wish granted, and convinces himself he is granting hers in the process. He gives her meat for the dog that she does not know is poisoned, and tells her to feed it to him and look for movement as a sign that God has heard her prayers. Pecola unwittingly feeds it to the dog and watches him die in agony. She is horrified, sickened, and takes it as a sign of her unworthiness. From being everybody's victim, she has now been made into a victimizer, the ultimate imposition. Soaphead writes a long rambling letter to God to let Him know that he Soaphead had done what God had not:

I, I have caused a miracle. I gave her the eyes. I gave her the blue, blue, two blue eyes. Cobalt blue. A streak of it right out of your own blue heaven. No one else will see her blue eyes. But she will. And she will live happily ever after . . . Now you are jealous. You are jealous of me. (143)

The man is utterly mad, and in his madness has sent Pecola over the edge into her own. In "Spring" we have seen Pecola humiliated by her mother and raped by her father, and have understood how this came to pass because of hard times and life misfortunes, but this madness of Soaphead's seems to spring from the degradation of an entire race that despises itself. This too is the matrix of rot that causes teeth to fall, leaving a gaping void.

That void is explored in the last section, "Summer," which has one Claudia subsection and one begun by Jane-talk. Claudia's first line is a reminder of the most perverted image in Soaphead's letter to God. Claudia says, "I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry, and I see summer -- its dust and lowering skies." (146) Soaphead speaks to God of the breasts of very young girls: "I couldn't, as you must recall, keep my hands, my mouth, off them. Salt-sweet. Like not quite ripe strawberries covered with the light salt of sweat" (141). Soaphead's strawberry association smacks of cannibalism, as he uses the young girls only to satisfy his appetites, with no regard for what happens to them. This is the epitome of the human evil done

in this book, as self-serving appetite is the immediate motive for many misdeeds, including Cholly's rape of Pecola. Claudia's image is also typical of her thought patterns: natural sweetness within a forbidding setting. Claudia and Frieda's innocence pierces us with its inherent irony when see them try to help Pecola by the only means they know, the magic of self sacrifice and abnegation. As an offering to God they plan to bury the money from selling packets of seeds, and bury the seeds where they can watch over them; but, as we know from the beginning, there were no marigolds that years: their prayer for Pecola is not answered. Soaphead's nasty magic is more powerful, as is the harm wished upon Pecola by her every human contact except the MacTeers. Even the whores have mistreated her by refusing to care enough about her, inculcating themselves just as much as anyone who actively abuses her. It is only the girls whose name suggests "children of sorrow" who care for her and try to protect her, but they are not enough. The entire world has been set against Pecola by the forces of social and personal history that intersect with hers. All these vectors come together to make her the universal victim, everybody's scapegoat.

Pecola gets short shrift from everyone except Claudia and Frieda, as they learn as they begin "to piece a story together, a secret, terrible, awful story." (147) While they are out selling their seeds, they gradually overhear a composite conversation that informs them of Pecola's incestuous rape and pregnancy, by way of the call-and-response gossiping that we've heard several times before. One gossipier blames Pecola directly: "'She carry some of the blame. . . . How come she didn't fight him?'" (147) We also find out that Pecola's own mother has blamed her: "'They say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive herself.'" (148) They even wish the baby dead:

"She be lucky if it don't live. Bound to be the ugliest thing walking."

"Can't help but be. Ought to be a law: two ugly people doubling up like that to make more ugly. Be better off in the ground."

"Well, I wouldn't worry none. It be a miracle if it live." (148)

This casual viciousness parallels Soaphead's assumption of the authority of life and death over the dog and Pecola. It makes Claudia and her sister shamed, embarrassed, hurt, and finally sad: "our sorrow was the more intense because nobody

else seemed to share it. . . . We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils." (148) This eye image is twinned with another right after, as Claudia envisions Pecola's baby in the womb: "the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin." (148). She loves this baby if nobody else in the world does, because it is a black baby whose beauty is its own and not that decreed best by the world: "I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live -- just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals." (148) Out of the desire to do something about this, they decide to make a miracle, choose their sacrifices, and start to make plans. Frieda's words take us right back to Claudia's introduction as she says "we'll plant the seeds out back of our house so we can watch over them. And when they come up, we'll know everything is all right." (149) As we always knew, they never came up, and everything was never all right. But now we know the how, and maybe even the why. Claudia's last words to her sister are "'All right. Only let me sing this time. You say the magic words.'" (149) The magic words aren't efficacious to keep

Pecola's baby alive, but Claudia's singing is, in a sense. The baby and Pecola have continuance because of Claudia's need to make sense of what happened to them, and to say it well enough to be understood. This too is proof of the value of language in Morrison's ethos. All that anyone can do for Pecola or the baby is to keep them alive in our minds, as both Claudia and the Jane-speaker do, and Morrison herself. There is a sense of layering here, of large effect containing small, that is a mirror of the blame for Pecola's fate, which opens out from small to large. For instance, Morrison gives us the Jane-speaker, who gives us the voice of Pauline Breedlove, who quotes speech heard around her. Cholly is to blame for raping Pecola, but he is the victim of crazy and indifferent parents, who were the victims of their personal and racial circumstances, caused in turn by the forces of society rooted in large-scale injustice. We have seen this kind of parallel structure all through the book, often with small and large things paired for effect. This is the major plot-reason for the MacTeer sections, and it accounts for strands of imagery that run from one section to another, from one person's life to another; eyes, for instance, are everywhere, as are color and the natural

world. All this careful structuring is in essence another pairing, of word to deed, whose product is mutual experience and therefore shared reality.

When we next see Pecola, she is existing in a place of no mutual experience at all, and precious little reality of any sort. In the Jane-talk that heads the subsection irony achieves orbit:

LOOKLOOKHERECOMESAFRIENDTHE
 FRIENDWILLPLAYWITHJANETHEYWI
 LLPLAYAGOODGAMEPLAYJANEPLAY
 (150).

Except for Claudia and Frieda, who have never appeared in the Jane-talk sections, Pecola has no friends, so we are puzzled to whom this can refer, and hurt to the bone when we find out. At first glance the section seems made up of a dialogue between two people, with the words of one person in regular print and the other's in italics. On the page it looks a lot like the gossiping we have already seen in various contexts. When we begin to read, we are puzzled, as the language is oblique and allusive, elliptical to the point of unintelligibility, as the Jane-talk passage seems at first. Gradually we come to realize that this too is a

small box with a big bang, as it dawns on us that Pecola is talking to herself, or, rather, that one half of Pecola is talking to the other half. The pressures of the world have imploded her center, and she is now a disintegrated, fragmented being with no core to call her own. She is a schizophrenic whose parts aren't even happy with each other, don't agree at all on the nature of reality, and continually argue back and forth. This arguing is the dialogue we see on the page.¹⁰

One of these Pecolas seems to have ordinary brown eyes; the other has blue. The brown-eyed one thinks the other spends too much time checking her eyes in the mirror, is told she's jealous, and only manages to soothe the shakier Pecola down by admitting that she is indeed jealous and reassuring her over and over again that her eyes are "Really, truly, bluely nice." (151) But brown-eyes gets impatient again and says the blue-eyed one is crazy, and has to apologize again. When they go outside, blue-eyed Pecola stares into the sun, over the objections of the other, and they talk about how nobody will look directly at the Pecola with blue eyes. She thinks they are all jealous too, and says that the other Pecola is her only true friend. When she

asks why she only sees her since she got her eyes, the brown eyed one tells her that she didn't need her before, but that she was always there, "'Right after your eyes.'" (152) As they natter on at each other we find out that blue-eyed Pecola was thrown out of school, that the brown-eyed one can only be seen by Pecola, and that the brown-eyed one may be closer to rationality than the blue-, but she is a lot meaner, as she enjoys teasing blue-eyed Pecola about being raped not once, but twice, by her father, and moves from this to teasing about her eyes. At first she reassures her that her eyes are bluer than anybody else's, but then insinuates doubt so cleverly that the other ends up begging for help: "'Please. If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world. . . . suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?'" (157) When brown-eyed Pecola asks "'Blue enough for what?'" (157), the blue-eyed one replies, "'Blue enough . . . for you!'" (158) She is utterly dependent on the tough side of herself that treats her a lot like the rest of the world has -- with careless contempt. No matter how much security she has achieved through the blue eyes Soaphead has given her, it will never be enough. No

matter how deep she goes into her own gibbering, sun-staring mind, she knows that there is no safety to be had in this world. Every event of her life has pounded this into her heart, mind, and body. No part of her has escaped unwounded.

Once again, bare plot recital is not enough to grasp the essence, and that is just the point. What must be welded to how; that is where we get the why. These interchanges are brief and oblique. The reader must work to understand what is going on, must involve herself completely. This schizophrenic world is like no other, either in the book or outside, and the reader has been brought to the pitch of imagination to be able to slide into it and out again, but not without pain. Part of the pain stems from the gradual revelation of what is going on here, the confusion that ensues, and the final frightful clarity of grasping the price Pecola has paid for her blue eyes. Finally, reading this book, and especially this section, is an act of love on the reader's part, an act of willing self sacrifice for the sake of the beloved. The beloved is Pecola, and all damaged children, and perhaps some of those who hurt others out of their own woundedness. Experiencing their pain with them is an act of creative transference, of imagination. Morrison

begins the process when she gets them down onto the page with every technique she can find, especially the immediate ones of poetry. The reader is necessary to complete that process, to make the language heard, the lives felt. The bluest eye to which the title refers may be Pecola's pitiful wish, but it also the beauty that is created when two or more gather together in the name of compassion. It is no accident that this exchange echoes the spare, strange cadences of Waiting for Godot, which attempts to mirror the entire existential quandary of humankind. As Pecola peers into her mirror to see how blue her eyes are, we peer into this child's mind to see how blue our own eyes can be.

The two introductions to The Bluest Eye are mirrored by two conclusions. This dialogue balances the introductory Jane-talk passage, giving us another clue to what sort of intelligence has been presenting those parts all along. It may be that the Jane-speaker is the voice of creative, imaginative transference itself. Not just the author, not just the characters, surely not just Pecola; this composite voice also includes the sensibility of Claudia MacTeer, although not necessarily her voice as we have heard it in the sections specifically narrated by her. Those sections

come directly from her experience; it is possible that the others are based partly on her efforts to understand what went on, to investigate or create a background, a rationale, for the events she saw but darkly as a child. The Jane-speaker may be at least partly Claudia coming to imaginative terms with the fate of Pecola Breedlove. Her language and that of the Jane-speaker gradually come closer together in terms of phrasing, diction, metaphoric quality, and sorting out meaning by way of philosophic rumination. Elements crisscross more and more often as the book progresses, with some of each in the other. We have seen much doubling, parallelism, and mirroring all through The Bluest Eye in terms of language and plot. Perhaps Claudia and the Jane-speaker are the yin and yang of sensibility, one founded in direct personal experience and logic, the other in imaginative transference and intuition. The actual Jane-talk passage and transfigurations may be the bridge between the two modes, the compressed chaos from which order ensues; the big bang theory of artistic creation. Maybe language and society as matrix are the two lines of force that create us all, reader, writer, and the world that comes into being between us.¹¹

In any case, the very last section of this book is given over to the thoughts of Claudia, who begins with "So it was." (158) These are also the first words of the section where Cholly rapes Pecola (127), and there gather up into one point all Cholly's personal history that we have learned. The "so it was" signals that this is how and why things have come to this pass, and are spoken by the Jane-speaker. The "So it was" of Claudia's last words indicates that the how and why we were promised in Claudia's introduction have been answered. Claudia's voice takes on the poetic, editorial quality that the Jane-speaker has most often had : "A little black girl yearns for the blue eyes of a little white girl, and the horror at the heart of her yearning is exceeded only by the evil of fulfillment." (158) Claudia has not been very prone to categoric words like "horror" and "evil," but here they seem appropriate in her voice. Her last description of Pecola echoes the wounded bird image of her being teased on the playground and by Maureen Peal:

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap-green days, walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an

eternal, grotesquely futile effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach -- could not even see -- but which filled the valleys of the mind. (158)

This image is the metaphorical, visual counterpart of the state of mind that we have already experienced directly in Pecola's dialogue, and is another instance of the doubling that is the armature of this work. It heaps horror on horror, as Morrison as does all through, by making us feel with Pecola both inside and out. Pity is too simple an emotion, both for us and Claudia. She and we must take responsibility. In several paragraphs built from elegant parallel structures, she makes it clear that all who do not prevent such evil participate in its creation. The children of light who do nothing cause it to be "much, much, much too late." (160) Morrison invites the reader into the book by using a range of poetic techniques and modes that require our full attention, our complete investment. The understanding that is created by the mutual efforts of the writer and reader lessens the chance of such evil passing unnoticed, as our feelings are just as engaged as our minds. Indeed, the close explication we have made of The Bluest Eye serves both, as it slows our reading down so that our

understanding can catch up to the intense effect of poetic language. We see how the magic is done: with word smoke and structural mirrors. Morrison and we have borne witness, and The Bluest Eye is our testimony.

Endnotes

1. Morrison makes this clear in a 1983 interview with Claudia Tate: "My writing expects, demands, participatory reading, and I think that is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something exciting. Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience." (125)

2. Marcia Gillespie ("Toni Morrison" Ms 1988) quotes the novelist Gloria Naylor concerning the publication of The Bluest Eye: "It said to a young poet, struggling to break into prose, that the barriers were flexible; at the core of all was language, and if you're skilled enough with that, you can create your own genre.'" (61)

3. This passage serves as a litmus paper for critical predisposition. Doreatha Mbalia says that the three versions

of the passage represent the three levels of social empowerment in the Dick and Jane family, the MacTeers, and the Breedloves. She feels that the level of coherence is a reflection of the strength of their relative positions in society, and that "The structural layout of the passages enhances the theme that as Africans born in a racist society, neither the MacTeers nor the Breedloves enjoy the benefits of America that their European counterparts do." (33-4) As we might guess from this, Mbalia major's preoccupation is class consciousness, and she deprecates Morrison because "her class analysis is immature at this point" (29), but hopes that Morrison will learn to "structure her text to represent the type of economic system that condemns exploitation and promotes collectivism: socialism" (38).

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi feels that the reproduction of the passage three times is the beginning of a triadic structural pattern that pervades the entire book. He identifies the first printing with Geraldine's family, as the most ordered; the second with the MacTeers, "which still has some order, some form of control, some love" (113); and the third with the Breedloves, whom he identifies with loss

of all order. He interprets several of the book's turning points in these terms; for instance, he thinks Cholly is trying to reestablish order by raping his daughter, since he "sacrifices Pecola unconsciously and selfishly in order to exorcise from his spirit the nightmare of his first sexual experience by making his daughter's as harrowing as his." (117)

The critic whose treatment of this passage is closest to my own is Jacqueline De Weever, who says that the first "sentences lay out the clear, simple, synthetic world of the storybook. Repeated without punctuation, the world is still recognizable" but the third time "the sentences approach the psychic confusion of the novel" (403). I agree with her interpretation as far as it goes, but we will consider the matter much more extensively.

3. We have Toni Morrison's own word for this: "I tell you at the beginning of The Bluest Eye on the very first page what happened, but now I want you to go with me and look at this, so when you get to the scene where the father rapes the daughter, which is as awful a thing, I suppose, as can be imagined, by the time you get there, it's almost

irrelevant because I want you to look at him and see his love for his daughter and his powerlessness to help her pain." (Tate 125)

4. Linda Wagner suggests that "the novel is built on these almost unspeakable contrasts, and Morrison's narrative strategy is to show the contrasts, but always ironically and nearly always through the eyes of children" (193).

5. Morrison also had this to say to Tate: "I try to clean the language up and give words back their original meaning, not the one that's sabotaged by constant use . . . If you work very carefully, you can clean up ordinary words and repolish them, make parabolic language seem alive again." (126)

6. Valerie Smith points out that "The narrator tells Geraldine's story as if she were a type, not an individual, in order to emphasize the extent of her assimilation; she is so thoroughly socialized that nothing original remains." (128) It also works the other way; that in learning so viscerally the member of a class, we know the class itself better.

7. Trudier Harris places Pauline Breedlove squarely in the tradition of black mammies, and says that she "lacks both the knowledge and instinct to nurture her children into healthy adults. . . . Children born to a parent with such distorted, unrealistic values can only miraculously develop strong conceptions of themselves." (59-60) There is no miracle for Pecola.

8. Dorothy Mbalia sees this as a serious weakness in the structure of the novel, "one instance of Morrison's inability to make her text cohere" (37), but there is room for more than one view.

9. "With Soaphead, I wanted, needed someone to give the child her blue eyes. . . . he would be wholly convinced that if black people were more like white people they would be better off. . . . Someone who would never question the request in the first place." (Toni Morrison to Robert Stepto 483)

10. There are about as many theories about Pecola as there are critics. Keith Byerman, for instance, calls her a "grotesque Messiah" (452) who is so moved by her obsessive

love for Shirley Temple that "she creates a self-contained reality that cannot be penetrated even by rape and incest." (448) One wonders what role he thinks those factors do play in her life, and why blue-eyed Pecola reacts so violently to mentions of Cholly.

Samuels and Hudson-Weems espouse a Sartrean existentialist viewpoint, suggesting that "Pecola's failure to define and accept her own perceptions denies her inherent freedom and responsibility but does not negate their existence. Because she fails to realize this responsibility . . . She remains dishonest with herself. . . . Pecola remains responsible, in the final analysis, for what happens to her." (15) We must ask ourselves, how responsible is any twelve year old for her existence? Ogunyemi seems to be getting at the same thing when he says there is no real reason for her madness, that it is an unconvincing deus ex machina (119). In other places in his article, however, he does repeatedly call her a scapegoat.

Both Claudia Tate and Linda Wagner seem to have a view of mad-Pecola that is colored by wishful thinking. Wagner thinks of the split Pecola as having an "imaginary friend," but states that the scene leaves the reader "with almost

unbearable despair" (195). Tate says that "Pecola goes quietly insane and withdraws into a fantasy world in which she is the most beloved little girl because she has the bluest eye of all." (117) Her world seems nowhere near as comfortable as this implies, and she is not at all certain of having the bluest eyes or being anybody's beloved.

The interpretations of Pecola's madness closest to that presented in the body of this paper occur in essays by Cynthia Davis and Valerie Smith, neither of whom pursue their ideas at much length. Davis says that "Pecola is the epitome of the victim in a world that reduces persons to objects and then makes them feel inferior as objects." (330) I agree with Smith that "her insanity really results from the cumulative weight of her own self-loathing and that of those who project onto her their contempt for themselves." (123) These versions of Pecola's madness seem closest to the text itself, with no imposed theory and nothing left hanging.

11. "I was interested in reading a kind of book that I had never read before. I didn't know if such a book existed,

but I had just never read it in 1964 when I started writing
The Bluest Eye." (Toni Morrison to Bettye J. Parker 252)

CHAPTER TWO: DEARLY BELOVED

After some time has elapsed, it is very possible to remember nothing about a book except how it made us feel as we read it. Long after we have forgotten all the plot and language ramifications of The Bluest Eye, for example, we will remember the devastating sense of loss and injustice it engenders. Careful exploration of the book can serve to make the details last longer in our brains, but there is no need (or way) to heighten the effect it has on our hearts. Close explication has shown us how that effect was reached by deliberate, minute increments of language arrangement and narrative voice shading. As we have seen, those increments rely largely on the techniques of poetry to provoke a sense of immediate experience.

Morrison continues to court this immediacy in Beloved, and does so in many of the same ways. The main difference between the effect of The Bluest Eye and Beloved is that when we come away from the latter it is not with one overwhelming emotion, but with a wider, more complex sense of having experienced something many faceted and many

layered. It is not possible to say that we feel one thing because the book is not centered on one character, as The Bluest Eye is on Pecola. Beloved is replete with many characters who claim our attention, and many who can also claim our allegiance. It is through them that we experience the complex emotions of this book.

Rather than trying to trace the total development and effect of all the characters, we will take a close look at one of the major strands in the image patterns of each of three human characters, and one not so human. The humans are Sethe and Paul D, because they bridge the entire action of the book; and Sixo, a vivid minor character who is an exemplar of how Morrison weaves threads of imagery together to form a three dimensional person. The extra-human character is the title character, Beloved, who may or may not be a ghost. When we come away from Beloved, it is with the impression of having met and known these four entities, and our experience of them is representative of our experience of the book. Examination of how Morrison brings them into being illustrates her overall work method. In Beloved, as in The Bluest Eye, this is based on the fusion of poetry to narrative, especially in the formation of

ongoing image patterns and subtle shifts in the narrative voice. These image patterns are the bases of entity formation, and the entities in turn are the bases for the shifts in consciousness centers that are integral to the narrative technique of Beloved, which we will also consider.

Despite the title, the central character of Beloved is Sethe, a woman born and raised in slavery, who escapes with her children for their sake. She also tries to kill them to prevent their return to less-than-human bondage, and succeeds in the case of her elder daughter, known to us only as Beloved. Many recurring images comprise the tapestry of Sethe's life, such as the costly pink gravestone, the chokecherry tree lashed into her back, the oily blood of her daughter, her mask-like eyes, the hummingbirds with needle beaks that attack her head, and reduction to snakeness when she is "just a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby's last hours" (Beloved 34. All page references are to this edition.) The image which recurs most frequently, however, is that of milk, especially maternal milk.

Oddly enough, the first lactic image concerns the death of Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, as Sethe tells Paul D that her death was "Soft as cream. Being alive was the hard

part." (7) When Paul D first steps into the pool of sad red light, he reminds Sethe of this soft-as-cream image, and she has to tell him the haunting force is her dead daughter. Even before this, he has had a sharp memory of Halle and the churn, which he does not yet share with Sethe. This cream image is bracketed by the very last lactic mention in the book, which comes at a time when Beloved is doing her utmost to take over Sethe's life and substance. Beloved never gets "enough of anything: lullabies, new stitches, the bottom of the cake bowl, the top of the milk" (240). This is followed by a reminder of "the night they ice-skated under a star-loaded sky and drank sweet milk by the stove" (240), the beginning of Sethe's subsummation of herself into Beloved. All along Sethe has been trying to justify her violent actions toward her children, crying that "she had to get them out, away, that she had the milk all the time . . . That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever." (241) Beloved isn't interested in her justifications, but in "lapping devotion like cream" (243). She is "a succubus leeching Sethe's energy, resources, and spirit, using Sethe's motherlove as means of enslavement" (Gillespie Ms 11/87). Thus cream is used at the

first of the book as ironic reference to the fact that death is never that easy, especially not for Baby Suggs, whose own motherhood was thwarted eight times, and whose faith in the power of love was broken by Sethe's actions and the community's complicit culpability. At the opposite end of the book cream refers to the loss of essential vitality that Sethe suffers through remorse, embodied in Beloved. These then are rather perverse variations of the maternal milk that means so much to Sethe.

An even more perverse milk variation is the butter from the churn that Paul D remembers almost as soon as he sees Sethe, and whose significance he hides from her for a long time. Many glancing mentions of this churn and butter are made both before and after Sethe is told everything, but Paul D only opens up because Sethe is still blaming Halle for not getting away from Sweet Home. He himself has not fully understood what happened to Halle until Sethe tells him how the pupils took her milk, and how the tree was lashed into her back. Halle must have seen this because the last time Paul D saw him he was sitting by the churn with butter all over his face, a broken man. Paul D's memory pieced together with Sethe's melds the two fragments into a

complete understanding of Halle's fate for the first time for both of them, a pattern repeated often in their relationship. It is almost more than Sethe can take, her husband "squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face because the milk they took is on his mind. As far as he is concerned, the world may as well know it." (70) This horror is added to the gross violation of her personhood that the rape of her milk amounts to: injury piled on injury, loss on loss. The theft of her milk has outraged both her sense of herself as a human being and as a mother; now it outrages her sense of self as a wife and lover. For eighteen years she has been angry with Halle, whom she chose to love as a girl, and her disappointment has been through no fault of his own. She feels guilty, exhausted, and wishes that she could go back and fall apart with Halle:

And how sweet that would have been: the two of them back by the milk shed, squatting by the churn, smashing cold, lumpy butter into their faces with not a care in the world. Feeling it slippery, sticky -- rubbing it in their hair, watching it squeeze through their fingers. What a relief to stop it right there. Close. Shut. Squeeze the butter. But her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio, and no butter play would change that. (70-1)

What saves her, both at Sweet Home and at the time of Paul D's revelation, is her deep, abiding maternal strength, signified so often by milk. She gets herself to Cincinnati largely because she feels the crawling already? baby girl needs her milk, and she expects to have a future eighteen years later because she has to take care of Denver and Beloved, including the sweetened milk of the skating night and the cream of devotion that Beloved laps up so avidly.

When Sethe begins to explain herself to Paul D, it is largely in terms of her milk,¹ both its strengths and its costs. She tells him how she still had milk for the baby girl even though she was pregnant with Denver, how it stained the front of her dress in its abundance, and how she knew it was imperative to get the milk to Cincinnati for her daughter (16). Paul D wants to know how a tree was put onto her back and Sethe reveals how the schoolteacher's nephews stole her milk (17). This animalistic treatment disturbs her the most deeply, but Paul D is most disturbed by the vicious whipping that carves its marks into the skin of her back. His failure to grasp the deep significance of the milk-rape for Sethe is a foreshadowing of the failure to communicate that drives him from her bed and house. Though he mistakes

the depth and fierceness of her maternal instinct, he does try to comfort her and holds "her breasts in the palms of his hands" (17); but it is the physical suffering that transfixes him, not the violation of her humanity. Sethe is unaware of their difference in focus and feels that "the responsibility for her breasts, at last, was in somebody else's hands" (18). She hopes that the flow of events can stop for a while, that she can rest "relieved of the weight of her breasts, smelling the stolen milk again . . . because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank" (18). The split in their reaction to the milk-theft and the beating suggests that this is not to be, signaling another turning point in Sethe's fortune, as the milk-rape and Denver's birth were.

Sethe's own mother was only allowed to nurse her for two or three weeks, and then Sethe "sucked from another woman whose job it was" (60), but who had no maternal feeling for Sethe. Sethe saw her mother only a few times before she was hanged (maybe for trying to escape), but in their one close encounter Sethe's birthmother lifted her breast to show her a secret sign burned into her skin that Sethe could use to identify her always (61). This circle and

cross symbol is a cabalistic emblem of the freemasonry of motherhood, and its location is surely no accident. When Sethe is telling Denver and Beloved about it she says that she later had a mark of her own (61), but this goes unexplained except to place her in a line of fierce, relentless women capable of absolute action. While telling the story, Sethe suddenly remembers that she was told as a very small girl that her mother had deliberately kept her because she was the daughter of a black man, but had cast away children born of whites. This makes her own capability of slaying her children seem more possible; and it is the breast and the milk that signify the spiritual kinship.

Soon after this Paul D reveals the buttery fate of Halle and the milk that has signified personhood, motherhood, and strength becomes changed into a sign of dissolution and madness, meshing emotionally with the stolen milk that has galled Sethe for eighteen years. In revealing Halle's fate Paul D has to reveal more of his own than he wants to: the fact that he could not speak to Halle because he had an iron bit in his mouth. This was his form of bestialization, as the milk-rape was Sethe's, and his revelation of it only under duress suggests how little he is

able to speak of these once and present horrors, and how hard it will be for Paul D and Sethe to find mutual firm ground. The courage to reveal his vulnerability, however, comes directly from his compassion for the pain of Sethe and Halle, both signified by lactic images. This courage and compassion form the basis of Paul D's character, and thus the milk imagery does double duty as a direct and indirect creative device.

The certain loss of Halle sends Sethe to the Clearing to pay tribute to her lost husband, at the site where his mother adjured the blacks to love themselves, to love their bodies and lives. Sethe remembers her arrival in Cincinnati, when Baby Suggs kissed her on the mouth and tended her broken body so that the baby who was Denver could take nourishment from her mother's body and fall asleep with "eyes half open [and] tongue dream-sucking" (93). When Sethe was strong enough, she was given her other children, including her Beloved daughter, whom "she lay back and cradled . . . in her arms. She enclosed her left nipple with two fingers of her right hand and the child opened her mouth. They hit home together." (94) This apotheosis of homecoming is the best that Sethe is ever to have, coming

twenty-eight short days before she tries to save her beloved child from the dehumanization she feels is worse than death. This time her milk is a sign of that her maternal intensity is her best strength and her relationship with her children her dearest. However, outside forces and circumstance can cast both into strange and fearful forms.²

Despite nearly being strangled in the Clearing, possibly by her daughter's ghost, Sethe leaves it with a sense of renewed strength and purpose, intending to make a life large enough to hold Paul D, Denver, and Beloved. "There was no question but that she could do it. Just like the day she arrived at 124 -- sure enough, she had milk enough for all." (100) Just like that day, she is riding for a fall because she cannot control all the variables, cannot change the forces of history and personal event. A lot of each pass through the narrative of Beloved before milk is mentioned again, this time by an omniscient voice that relates the central event of this book, the climax of Sethe's pain: the murder of her daughter. In the aftermath, Baby Suggs can only get Sethe to hand over the body of the crawling already? baby girl by telling her it is time to nurse Denver. When Baby comes back from laying the small

body down, Sethe is "aiming a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth." Baby Suggs fights to prevent this, slips in a pool of blood, and "So Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister." (152) This twists the screw to yet a higher pitch of horror, and as always, milk is part of a turning point of Sethe's life.

It is also a turning point for Denver, as she knows this happened since Baby Suggs guarded her from fear of the baby ghost by telling her that the ghost could never hurt her because she had tasted its blood. This establishes a bond between the two that allows Denver to become content to have only the ghost for a playmate, to accept her as an actual being there to help her wait for the father she hopes will someday rescue her from the mother she fears. Thus when the adult Beloved appears she is eager to claim her: "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk." (205) This part of her personal history informs every facet of Denver's life, making her both a participant in and resistant to the violence done by her mother. It also shapes Denver's relationship with her mother in ways that Sethe is not aware of, but which affect every part of their lives.

The other instances of milk imagery in Beloved are less dramatic, but no less reverberant. When Paul D leaves, the way is open for Sethe to accept Beloved as her actual daughter, and she does. Sethe takes Denver and Beloved ice skating, and we are told three times that "Nobody saw them falling" (174-5). This isolated fun and travail exhausts and freezes them, and when they come in Sethe prepares a special treat of warm milk with cane syrup and vanilla in it. As they consume this, Beloved begins humming a lullaby Sethe invented for her babies, and Sethe recognizes her for her own child. Even so, "No milk spilled from her cup because her hand was not shaking." (175) She is ready to accept what has been sent her, to believe that the past can be changed. Sethe has lived with her pain so long that she is willing to believe anything to relieve it, and she calmly wipes "the white satin coat from the inside of the pan" and ascends the "lily-white stairs like a bride. . . . The peace of winter stars seemed permanent." (176) Sethe needs this white illusion, and becomes almost eager to give herself up to Beloved to get it.

As she sinks farther and farther into a world that contains only Beloved, Sethe refuses to allow the world any

more access to her heart because of all the harm done her, including "Drain her mother's milk, they had already done."

(188) As she talks to Beloved in her head, Sethe tells how she managed to leave Sweet Home despite Paul D's degradation and Paul A's hanging. She pleads her case:

I walked right on by because only me had your milk,
and God do what He would, I was going to get it to you.
You remember that, don't you, that I did? That when I
got here I had milk enough for all? (198)

Sethe terribly wants Beloved to understand why she had to do what she did, and often tries to justify herself in terms of her milk-loss and milk-strength. In the section in which she flatly claims the current Beloved as her daughter returned, Sethe spends more than a page on milk, starting with "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children" (200), and progressing through the pain she herself felt because she was deprived of her mother's milk: "I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left." (200) She feels again the pain of the theft of her milk, but how the triumph of getting her milk to her crawling already? girl made up for it. For the first time we see that she was hurt

to have to leave Mrs. Garner, as close to a mother as she had most of her life, and how this was another result of the milk-rape. We also find out for the first time that her birthmother's death unhinged her to the point of making her stutter -- until she saw Halle. The depth of her losses becomes clearer, as does the depth of her need to recoup at least one by believing that Beloved is her child come back.

The next time milk is mentioned by a character is in one of the triple arias in the section where the voices of Sethe, Beloved, and Denver blend together and become inextricable: "I have your milk / I have your smile / I will take care of you" (216). This fusion of voice and intent is a sign of the subsummation that Sethe undergoes and which results, as we have seen, in Beloved lapping devotion like cream. A last instance of this pattern glides through her mind as Sethe lies burned to a cinder after Beloved has left, and Paul D comes to tend and comfort her. She wonders if he knows how to cleanse her, "Ending with her exhausted breasts". (272) We must believe that he does, that he finally recognizes her strength and her suffering equally, and that "He wants to put his story next to hers."⁶ (273) The power and the loss represented by lactic images bind

them together at last. The terrible breach can be healed that Paul D opened when he found out about the death of the child and offended Sethe grossly by taking her back to the dehumanization she suffered at the time of the milk-rape: "'You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (165). Full, shared humanity is no longer a question for either of them.⁴

This long chain of milk imagery does much to present Sethe to us in that full humanity, as well as doing much to set the tone and advance the action of the story. No doubt can exist that Morrison has carefully planned this one strand of the intricate pattern of images that comprise Sethe and company. She uses milk as an objective correlative in T. S. Eliot's sense, "as a pattern of objects, actions, or events . . . that can serve effectively to awaken in the reader an emotional response without being a direct statement of that subjective emotion" (Holman 342). This is a device most commonly used by poets and playwrights, but clearly it can be used for good effect in fiction that has elements of poetry grafted into it.

Several such objective correlatives can be pointed out in Morrison's formation of Paul D, including the iron bit we have already encountered, trees, the three-pronged collar,

the rooster Mister, the blossoms as he chases spring north from Alfred, Georgia, and the one we will track closely, the substitution of a tobacco tin for his heart. This image strand begins when Paul D begins to piece his memories together with Sethe's to form a composite mutual truth. He has told her about Halle and the churn, about the bit in his mouth, and about being daunted by Mister the rooster, but there is much more that he needs to tell her if she is to have all the truth of who he is. He is stopped by the sweet reassurance of her gentle touch, and decides to keep it to himself:

Saying more right then might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut. He would not pry it loose now in front of this sweet sturdy woman, for if she got a whiff of the contents it would shame him. And it would hurt her to know that there was no red heart bright as Mister's comb beating in him. (72-3)

This small passage is vibrant with meaning, a perfect miniaturization of the overall message of Beloved: the past cannot be shut away. Not dealing with it leads to paralysis, implicit deception, excessive self protectiveness, fearfulness, and mistaken perception of other people's

relative strength. In denying Sethe and himself full revelation at this juncture, Paul D sets himself up to have a relationship with her that is not based on complete mutual trust and respect, but on presentation of a partial image of the man that he wants to be taken for. When the time comes for him to accept all of her, after Stamp Paid tells him of the baby's death, he is unable to do so not least because he has not given all of himself. In clutching his secrets to himself as unbearable he makes himself less able to bear what must be borne for Sethe. This is an integral part of Morrison's message about the past: a person must be able to deal with his own before he can help anyone else do the same.⁵ "In Beloved, only when characters can recover the past do they begin to imagine a future." (Bowers 61)

In the tenth section of Beloved we find out where the tobacco tin came from, and a good part of what is in it. This section is told by an omniscient narrator who centers on Paul D, but not always in him, as if the events are too unbearable for him to remember in his own conscious mind. The narrative picks up when he is sent to the chain gang in Alfred, Georgia, after trying to kill the man who bought him when he was sold away from Sweet Home. The dehumanizing

events at Sweet Home and Alfred, Georgia, almost kill Paul D's soul, but he hangs on by a tiny shred of love and beauty, focusing his attention upon one little star. He is so exhausted in the process that the best he can do is to shut the old pain away and try to live as best he can as a man without a resolved past:⁶

It was some time before he could put Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest. By the time he got to 124 nothing in the world could pry it open. (113)

This last belief is clearly Paul D's own, not that of the narrator, and subject to change because of its very absoluteness.

And, indeed, it does change, in the very next section, which is centered in Paul D's consciousness, told only as he experiences it. Beloved, that emblem of the undeniable past, seizes power over Paul D and moves him all over the house for sleeping quarters, finally allowing him to sleep in a shed behind the house. She comes to him there and Paul D thinks he is safe from her influence because he "never worried about his little tobacco tin anymore. It was rusted

shut." (116) Beloved is there to seduce him, to get him to "touch [her] on the inside part" (116), and to say her name. He does and is lost, or maybe found:

She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it. What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, "Red heart. Red heart," over and over again. Softly and then so loud it woke Denver, then Paul D himself. "Red heart. Red heart. Red heart." (117)

If Beloved is the embodiment of the irresistible past, Paul D may have begun to face it, whether he knows what he is doing or not, since he does not yet know Sethe's full history or who Beloved may be. Indeed, this may be a clue that he is seduced by his own past, enslaved by it, and thus unable to be truly open and faithful to Sethe. It may be his own secret misery that he embraces, not Sethe's. This is made more likely by his reaction when Sethe tries to explain why she killed her daughter: his pointing out that she has two feet, not four. "Later he would wonder what made him say it. . . . How fast he had moved from his shame to hers. From his cold-house secret straight to her too-thick love." (165) The best result of this seduction may be that Paul D is more

able to change, to let himself feel deeply again and be ready for a new life if he has the strength to live it. However, it seems certain that he will have to hurt more before he can hurt less. As Amy Denver so cogently said, "'Anything coming back to life hurts.'" (35)

After he insults Sethe and exiles himself from her house, Paul D does find himself in a world of hurt. When next seen, he is living in the basement of a church and sitting on the steps of it drinking and holding his wrist between his knees "because he had nothing else to hold onto. His tobacco tin, blown open, spilled contents that floated freely and made him their play and prey." (218) Paul D considers the basic miseries of his life and wonders why he has bothered to keep alive so long. He also ponders over questions he has long left unasked: "Now, plagued by the contents of his tobacco tin, he wondered how much difference there really was before schoolteacher and after." (220) He comes to understand that to be a man only by Mr. Garner's leave was not to be a man at all, that "they had been isolated in a wonderful lie" (221), and that he is still not a man if he can be moved so easily by Beloved.⁷

Paul D is in the midst of this when Stamp Paid comes to explain that Sethe is not crazy, that she did what she did out of pure love. As he does, Paul D has a "bone-cold spasm" that comes at least partly from "the loss of a red, red heart," and asks Stamp "'How much is a nigger supposed to take?'" Stamp Paid's reply is the only one possible: "'All he can . . . All he can.'" (235) This marks the end of Paul D's mourning for himself, for his own past, and when he comes back to Sethe after Beloved has gone, he is able to accept her strength and love in the way Sixo could that of the Thirty-Mile Woman: "'She is a friend of my mind. She gather me, man. The pieces I am, she gather them and give them back to me in the right order.'" (272-3) Paul D has faced the past on its own terms of compulsion and shame, Sethe has faced it by meeting it head-on, and they have both survived the memories they could not even speak when first reunited. Both have escaped the death of the spirit that is the deepest tragedy of slavery, and seem well on the path to being able to own themselves. As Sethe thinks in the Clearing when she decides to have Paul D in her life, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another." (95) Sethe and Paul D can do this

at last; Sixo always could, at least in part because of his "friend of the mind."

Although Sixo is a minor character in terms of the amount of narrative time spent on him, he is major in terms of the influence he has on the other people in the story. Paul D, especially, still admires him eighteen years after his death because he was indeed a free man. This strong, free quality is exemplified by the image pattern most frequently associated with him: fire. The first time Sixo is seen, via Paul D's memory, he is described as "Indigo with a flame-red tongue," and on the same page he sleeps a righteous sleep after his first trip to the Thirty-Mile Woman, "his flame-red tongue hidden from them, his indigo face closed. . . . Now there was a man" (21-2). The suggestion of otherness and strength are heightened by his ability to dampen both at will.

This implication of fiery strength is furthered by Paul D's memory of the Thirty-Mile Woman the only time he meets her, a memory sparked by his worry over Beloved's bothersome "shining:"

But if her shining was not for him, who then? He had never known a woman who lit up for nobody in particular, who just did it as a general announcement.

Always, in his experience, the light appeared when there was focus. Like the Thirty-Mile Woman, dulled to smoke while he waited with her in the ditch, and starlight when Sixo got there. (65-6)

The inference is that Sixo's fire is strong enough to share with another person if he chose, and so it was, in more ways than one, leaving Paul D in awe of his manhood. It is almost the end of Beloved before Morrison reveals exactly what happened to Sixo, but she works up to it in careful steps, building curiosity with numerous little mentions of Sixo laughing, and of Sixo and fire. For instance, Sixo rather casually shows up in the middle of one of Sethe's catalogues of misery: "All news of them was rot. They buttered Halle's face; gave Paul D iron to eat; crisped Sixo; hanged her own mother. She didn't want any more news about whitefolk" (188). Clearly, something more awful happened to Sixo than we know yet, and it has to do with fire. The fact that it is not yet spoken means that it may be almost unspeakable, and since Sixo looms largest in Paul D's mind, he will need to be the one to do the remembering and the speaking.

After his tobacco tin has sprung open and pain has taken over his heart, Paul D is able to speak of Sixo, if only bitterly and to himself:

He couldn't figure out why it took so long. He may as well have jumped in the fire with Sixo and they both could have had a good laugh. Surrender was bound to come anyway, why not meet it with a laugh, shouting Seven-O! Why not? Why the delay? (218-19)

A little later there is another casual reference to "after Sixo laughed" (224), and we may think we have had the worst of it, that we know Sixo was burned but died laughing, and that is as much as we need to know. Morrison's method in this book, however, is a compilation of hints and references from various sources that lead up to some climactic scene, some revelation of previously hidden truth. This is as true for the death of Sixo as for the death of the baby girl. Indeed, Sixo's death is one of the causes of Beloved's, as Sethe's references show how deeply and lastingly it scarred her. Sixo's dreadful death must have been a major reason to refuse to allow her child to return to the perils of slavery. For Sixo's death is dreadful, and made all the more so by the transcendent courage with which he faces it.

When the escape plan goes wrong, only Sixo is able to meet Paul D and the Thirty-Mile Woman. He "shows up, his wrists bleeding, his tongue licking his lips like a flame" (225). The Thirty-Mile Woman catches some of his fire, as

"She is lit now with some glowing, some shining that comes from inside her." (225) The schoolteacher and other whitemen show up, and Paul D and Sixo get caught, but make sure the Thirty-Mile Woman gets away safely. Although they are tied, Sixo seizes a gun and starts to sing and wreak vengeance. He is knocked unconscious, and when he wakes up he is tied to a tree with a little fire started at his feet, only enough to cook hominy, or, inefficiently, a man:

By the light of the hominy fire Sixo straightens. He is through with his song. He laughs. A rippling sound like Sethe's sons make when they tumble in hay or splash in rainwater. His feet are cooking; the cloth of his trousers smokes. He laughs. Something is funny. Paul D guesses what it is when Sixo interrupts his laughter to call out, "Seven-O! Seven-O!"

Smoky, stubborn fire. They shoot him to shut him up. Have to. (226)

When Paul understands the dimensions of his loss, he thinks he should have at least sung along with Sixo, but he didn't understand the words, though that "shouldn't have mattered because he understood the sound: hatred so loose it was juba" (227). He also understood the laugh: "Shouting Seven-O! Seven-O! because his Thirty-Mile Woman got away with his blossoming seed. What a laugh. So rippling and full of glee it put out the fire." (228-9) Sixo's own fire is more

powerful than that of the whitemen, as the imagery forming him has so insistently suggested. With Sixo, we see how Morrison takes one elemental image, fire, and uses it as a sort of incremental refrain to create a person both vivid and believable. His contribution to the book is narrow but deep, as he is the paradigm of the perfect natural man, one who can love a woman completely and still own himself in the face of torture and death. His love and death are gallant, even transcendent, but not exactly human in the same way that Sethe and Paul D must make their lives: slogging through the sticky, retarding mud of too much history and adverse circumstance. We can revere and admire Sixo as a hero, but not love him as a compatriot of the everyday heart.

Nor can we love Beloved as such, which is about the only thing she has in common with Sixo. In many ways she is his exact opposite. For instance, Sixo is created basically from one image pattern, with one type of behavior, and shows no change from beginning to end. Beloved is protean, changes behavior and shifts shape constantly, and many image patterns cluster around her. However, these are not the steady, recognizable patterns that form Sethe and Paul D,

nor even Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid, as theirs gradually resolve into recognizably human infrastructures. The image patterns around Beloved shift throughout her stay at 124, and also depending upon whom she is encountering. Her very appearance changes from person to person, from time to time. It is hard to say if she actually changes, or if people see what they want or need to see.

Beloved's influence on the other characters is not anything like Sixo's, either, as he is definitely in the past and important mainly to Paul D. Beloved also belongs to the past, but has somehow been extended into the book's present, and has never truly left the house in the meantime. Not for nothing does Beloved start "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom." (3) And not for nothing does the book bear its name, as Beloved's presence leaves its mark on everyone in 124 and even beyond.

Just who or what is Beloved? For the purposes of this inquiry into Toni Morrison's artistic technique, we may assert that Beloved herself is a congeries of images, revealing various strands of her being to the other characters as she chooses, or perhaps as they choose. This is qualitatively different from the complicated image

patterns that make up a Sethe or a Paul D, which reveal them to us, Morrison's readers. Beloved is something different to everyone with whom she comes into contact, right up to the little boy who thinks she has fish for hair. Sethe and Paul D are who they are, people we gradually learn about and learn to love, as they do each other. Beloved is something else. She is a being without a personal history, except for the very short one of a less-than-two-years baby whose mother cuts her throat out of something like perfect love. All we really know about her as a human child is that she learned to crawl quickly, dribbled clear, laughing spit onto her mother's face, and was completely at home when returned to that mother's breast. And then, too soon, she was gone, turned into a spiteful ghost who puts her little handprints in the cake, breaks mirrors, and generally rocks the house. This is how she continues for eighteen years, until Paul D shows up in 1873.

Even as a baby ghost, Beloved is misunderstood. Paul D first takes her to be the ghost of Baby Suggs, and then takes her to be a phenomenon Sethe and Denver want run off. Neither does, for differing reasons, and when she reappears as a grown up human girl with no lines on her hands and a

scar on her throat, they are glad to see her for differing reasons also. Denver needs the company, Sethe needs to expiate her blood-debt, and Paul D needs to work on some problems of his own. But what do we as readers think she is? An actual ghost? A malevolent demon? An addled girl who has been terribly abused by whitemen somewhere? We cannot know for sure what Morrison intends her to be within the world of 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati, 1873-74, but we can know what she is by the effect she has within the story on the other characters. She exerts force on everything that comes near her much as a black hole bends light, and we may infer her nature the same way astronomers do such heavenly bodies: by the disruptions caused.

The effect Beloved has on Sethe is surely the most profound she has on anyone. It begins with the sharing of sweetened milk and progresses to Beloved lapping devotion like cream: from a healthy, sharing milk image to an entirely selfish one. For a long time, Sethe does not recognize Beloved as her lost daughter, maybe because she is not looking for her. Paul D is taking up most of her field of vision, has run off the baby ghost partly to make room for himself, and Sethe is not expecting her back in a

different form. It is only four days after Paul D leaves that Sethe recognizes and accepts Beloved as her own child, come back from the dead. What ensues is what D. Keith Mano calls "a dreadful exaggeration of the mother-child relationship" with "Miss Morrison's eponymous girl-demon" (55). This is probably the same thing Barbara Mathieson means when she says about Beloved that

death has locked her psyche into eternal infancy . . . a toddler yearning for . . . the unqualified love and unwavering attention of the mother whose identity she does not distinguish from her own. Sethe, for her part, immerses herself as fully in Beloved as any mother does her infant.⁹ (2-3)

Mathieson's is rather a benign view of what happens between Sethe and Beloved when "little by little it dawned on Denver that if Sethe didn't wake up some morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might" (242). The struggle they are locked in is not one for domination on Sethe's part, but for justification, as Beloved is the one person who can grant her forgiveness, the only person to whom she must explain herself. Morrison has said, "I felt the only person who could judge her would be the daughter she killed. . . . And from there Beloved inserted herself into the text." (Darling

5) Beloved serves Sethe as a sort of extruded, embodied conscience, an inescapable memory that must be dealt with or defeat acknowledged. For Sethe, she is a personification of all the wrongs of the past that must be recognized and expiated before there can be a future. She tries to do this constantly in terms of having brought the milk, in having had enough milk for all, in having been a mother who did the best she could with no good choices, but Beloved is not impressed.

Although Sethe has steadfastly maintained that she did the right thing in killing the baby girl, that she had no choice, she still knows that what she did was unthinkable, unspeakably wrong. The return of Beloved forces her to think of the wrongness and speak of it at great length to its victim, but Sethe also knows that it would have been just as wrong to let the child be taken back to slavery. The crushing weight of this paradox is what squeezes the life out of Sethe, as there can be no resolution. She does all she can to make Beloved happy, to make restitution, to explain herself, but it is never enough. Metaphorically, there is not enough milk in the world to hide the bloodstains on her hands, and Beloved lets her know it.⁹

The main reason for this is that Sethe has no clear idea what Beloved is.¹⁰ She thinks of her as an actual person, as she did when she found her blinking and dewy wet on the stump in her front yard. She took care of her then as she would any person, and once she believes Beloved to be her daughter she continues to think of her as a human being no different in kind from any other prodigal daughter. She even has wild hopes that Howard and Buglar will return and that she will have all four of her children together again. Sethe will do anything for her: "Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire." (240) As Sethe burns up her substance, waning like a last quarter moon, Beloved waxes fuller, "her belly protruding like a winning watermelon" (250). Sethe gives herself wholly over to her effort to earn forgiveness from Beloved, ignoring all signs to the contrary:

Denver saw the flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb fade. Saw Sethe's eyes bright but dead, alert but vacant, paying attention to everything about Beloved -- her lineless palms, her forehead, the smile under her jaw, crooked and much too long -- everything except her basket-fat stomach. (242-43)

In her frantic desire to rid herself of her blood-debt, Sethe does not notice that she is being taken over, used up, as Beloved "imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh, and used her body the same way down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head" (241). She does not see it because she does not want to see it, because she wants so much for Beloved to be her daughter come back to forgive her. She sees only her daughterliness and rejects all the facets of Beloved that do not meet her own preconceived needs.

In relationship to Sethe, Beloved seems to have her own agenda: to merge identities, maybe take Sethe over completely. Her needs, as Mathieson says, are infantile, and thus completely selfish. Sethe's mistake is being fooled by Beloved's outward adult appearance, which, added to Sethe's own desires, makes her seem to be her adult daughter, when Beloved is in many ways still just a baby girl; and perhaps, as Denver says later, "more" (266). Certainly when Ella and the townswomen come to save Sethe, Beloved is neither grown daughter nor infant. As Ella tells Paul D, "'they was holding hands and Sethe looked like a little girl beside it'" (265), and Beloved not at all like the thin, weak girl

who first appears at 124. Beloved has been transformed, perhaps by feeding off her mother's spirit, into

the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening, she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling. (261)

Roles have been reversed, the mother has become the child, and the child a mother. As Dean Flower says, this Beloved may well represent "the denied female self, Denver's repressed double, Sethe's empowered and justified daughter, out to get revenge for being negated" (212). In any case, it is hard to believe that "Beloved completes Sethe . . . the one whose presence remakes and rewrites Sethe's life in such a way that it becomes speakable, even pleasurable" (Levy 115). From Denver's testimony, Ella's observations, and the aftermath we observe directly, pleasure is the last thing that Sethe derives from Beloved. If the monkey is off Sethe's back, it is not before it has nearly strangled her and broken her spine.¹¹

Paul D senses the danger Beloved poses from the very beginning. He exorcises the baby ghost without consulting Sethe or Denver, but he thinks he is providing them peace.

When Beloved appears in her new avatar he is very uneasy about her presence, sensing something strange about her and not liking her. He already thinks that Sethe's love for Denver is too strong, and her casual caring for this foundling bothers him in its assumption of responsibility where none is owed. Paul D is therefore even more appalled when he begins to feel Beloved's power over him, when she begins to move him around in 124. When he succumbs to her seduction, he has metaphorically succumbed to the pain of the past, and even though it hurts him and his relationship with Sethe, it also sets him free. That long-rusted tobacco tin springs open to let light and air in to his long-denied pain, and the possibility of full manhood is restored. She is not a child returned, nor a ghostly daughter, but a way to get back to life at its most primal:

Coupling with her wasn't even fun. It was more like a brainless urge to stay alive. Each time she came, pulled up her skirts, a life hunger overwhelmed him and he had no more control over it than over his lungs. And afterward, beached and gobbling air, in the midst of repulsion and personal shame, he was thankful too for having been escorted to some ocean-deep place he once belonged to. (264)

In some arcane way, Paul D is able to make up for freedoms denied and opportunities missed all through his life. To him, Beloved represents the same drive towards physical union that Sethe called forth in him at Sweet Home. She also represents the danger of loving too much that he cautioned Sethe against and that he himself learned the hard way in the trench at Alfred, Georgia. Beloved liberates him from that caution, and he returns to his real nature: "the thing in him, the blessedness, that has made him the kind of man who can walk in a house and make the women cry. Because with him, in his presence, they could." (272) In spite of his resistance, letting this manifestation of antique pain have its way with him gives him strength. He is not sure what she is, but he knows that there is more to Sethe than she knows herself, as he tells her that she, not Beloved, is her "own best thing" (273). Once he has dealt with the dead, he is free to choose the living. Although Paul D refuses to look at Beloved when she seduces him, he cannot help but see the shining and gather some of that light to himself. This is yet another reversal of Sixo's pattern, as he gave his light to the Thirty-Mile Woman. Sixo is also fixed in history and effect, and Beloved is a loose cannon in both.

Beloved also seems to be the handiest spot for critics to hang their theoretical hats, as she is so capable of adapting to interpretation because of her changeability. To many, she is the embodiment of infantile need for a mother. To some she is a flat-out spook, a succubus, a demon, or an instrument of divine retribution. Doreatha Mbalia posits a fairly unique political interpretation:

Beloved becomes the symbol by which African people are to measure the devastating effects of isolation -- self-imposed or forced. Isolation literally tears apart the family -- the nuclear, the extended, the nation. The personification of isolation and all things inherent in it, including selfish individualism, greed, and destruction, Beloved succeeds in dividing 124 from the rest of the African community. It is she who drives Howard and Burglar [sic] from home . . . who separates Paul D, Sethe, and Denver . . . Not until the cause of the separation is clarified, is out in the open, struggled with and struggled against, can African people come together again. (90-91)

Mbalia's basic position is that "the traditional African principle of collectivism" (91) is the overriding theme of this book, and that whatever Beloved is she acts as a separator, a divider of person from person. Mbalia looks at this one effect Beloved has and sees only that aspect when she looks at her. This is not that different from Sethe seeing a forgiving daughter, Denver a sisterly companion,

Paul D a life force, or the thirty women some sort of gorgeous bugaboo. None of these are wrong, any more than Andrew Levy is when he says that *Beloved* is the creative scribe of Sethe's life (115), or Barbara Mathieson when she calls her an emotionally cannibalistic child out to rule the mother-child dyad (4). Susan Bowers believes that *Beloved* is "the embodiment of the collective pain and rage of the millions of slaves who died on the Middle Passage and suffered the tortures of slavery" (66), a large notion, but one Bowers finds some support for in the text, and much in her own grounding in West African metaphysics. Certainly one of the most provocative views of *Beloved* is Elizabeth House's that she is "not a supernatural being of any kind but simply a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery"(17). Her case rests on a close reading of chapters four and five of the second section as poetry rather than prose, and is persuasive on its own terms. This reading of *Beloved*'s nature changes the book into a bitterly ironic comedy of errors, as neither *Beloved* nor Sethe find what has been lost to them (22). As Margaret Atwood sums it up, "The reader is kept guessing; there's a lot more to

Beloved than any one character can see, and she manages to be many things to several people." (50)

Finally, we must see Beloved at the very least as a reversal of Morrison's usual character creation method. Rather than taking strands of metaphor and weaving them into an intelligible pattern, she invents an entity who herself acts as a screen for other people's projections, both inside the book and out. She becomes part of other people's image patterns more than existing through her own. One proof of this is that we never know the actual child's name, just the one word on her tombstone that becomes an epithet as well as an epitaph. As Morrison herself has said, a novel "suggests what the conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve these problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe" ("Rootedness" 341). If Beloved is a mysterious, problematical book, it is because Morrison chooses to make it so. If Beloved is a mysterious, problematical character, it is because Morrison chooses to make her so. The reasons, like Beloved's nature, may be discerned by paying close attention to the effect.

Beloved's chameleon nature fits well into an overall pattern in the book that we can infer from the way Morrison

chooses to handle the narrative voices. Very little of this story advances in a straight line at one time. Morrison is adept at moving one step forward and two steps back, which suits exactly the problems the characters face in coming to grips with the past. The nature of that past is itself a puzzle with pieces lost and strewn around liberally, necessitating individual and composite reconstruction. As D. Keith Mano puts it, Morrison is

mistress of the theatrical retard. Events are revealed through flashback and suggestive inference, slowly, tensely -- rather as a neurosis can be disassembled in Freudian analysis. And at the end, as in successful analysis, revelation is analeptic if harrowing. (55)

This analogy is apt, as most of the main characters of Beloved are indeed engaged upon exploration and recovery, although in more ways than one. In addition to Mano's Freudian suggestion, there are parallels to gestalt therapy, primal therapy, wild man liberation, and certainly much work is done on the inner child. In short, Morrison does anything she can to make these people's therapeutic journeys real and various, including making them walk in ways we might walk in our own experiences of inner exploration. It is all human, and essentially all indeterminate, as she touts no one right

way any more than she makes *Beloved* one rigid, definable being, or uses one rigid, definable narrative voice.

Narrative voice in *Beloved* is part and parcel of characterization and plot, contributing to the intertwining of sound and sense most often found in the province of poetry, but which is an identifying characteristic of all of Morrison's work. Rather than having an omniscient voice who tells all, Morrison has invented an omniscient voice that changes nature, that slides in and out of the minds and attitudes of characters, moving at will from one center of consciousness to another. Literary parallels spring to mind, such as William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* or Eudora Welty's *Delta Wedding*, but Morrison goes a step beyond these in that the language and voices are much more various and distinct, and sometimes more blended.

As Elizabeth House says, *Beloved*'s two autobiographical chapters may, perhaps should, be read as poetry.¹² The chapter in which the voices of Denver, Sethe, and *Beloved* blend in a "telepathic opera trio" (Mathieson 1) must be read only as poetry, as it is clearly meant to be felt rather than just understood. The final chapter in the book uses the triple repetition of "It was not a story to pass

on" (274-75) as an incremental refrain¹³ and ends with the resolving coda "Beloved." (275) Its language is dream-like, oracular, finely cadenced, and nothing if not poetic. Scattered through the book are multiplicities of language effects, including actual songs, dialogues with diverse purposes, and many figures of speech. As we have seen, extended metaphors in the form of objective correlatives are a basic building block for Beloved. Beloved herself acts as "a controlling metaphor for the book as a whole" (Finney 25). Interior monologues blur the boundaries between one speaker and another, one personality and another, especially among Sethe, Denver, and Beloved in the second section, when we hear them both collectively and individually, and it is not always possible to be sure who is speaking. The rhythms of black speech are not just in the mouths of the characters, but sometimes also that of the omniscient narrator. Diction is as fluid as rhythm, and always suitable to the needs at hand. All this variety is used to create a fluid unity, an apt parallel to memory and life itself¹⁴.

Intrinsic to this effect is the shifting nature of the narrative voice. Charting the voice shifts throughout Beloved would call for a volume in itself, but close

examination of one chapter can act as a representation of how "many stories . . . held synchronically in the reader's mind might . . . illuminate one another" (Drinkwater 106). The most appropriate chapter, perhaps, is the sixteenth of the book's twenty-eight, and central in every way, as it is the one in which Sethe actually kills the baby girl. It begins an omniscient voice telling about the arrival of four white horsemen at "the house on Bluestone Road" (148). This does two things: it recalls the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, who never mean anybody well; and it depersonalizes the house by switching from the way it is usually mentioned as 124, possessor of a personality of its own. The four horsemen are "schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff" (148), with subtle use of articles for particularity. There can be only one schoolteacher, the nephew and slave catcher are only one of their types, and the sheriff could be any sheriff, there to enforce the law and not out of personal spite or greed. Three of them dismount, and one stays on horseback watching, "his rifle ready" (148). The omniscient narrator slides unobtrusively into this person's consciousness and we realize that we are thinking the thoughts of the white slave

catcher, who is ruminating on his memories of blacks attempting to escape, how some seem to "accept the futility of outsmarting a whiteman and the hopelessness of outrunning a rifle", but then that "very nigger with his head hanging and a little jelly-jar smile on his face could all of a sudden roar, like a bull or some such, and commence to do unbelievable things" (148). It is clear from the diction who this must be, and if any doubt lingered, his mercenary nature is clinched by his last thought: "Unlike a snake or a bear, a dead nigger could not be skinned for profit and was not worth his own dead weight in coin." (148)

The omniscient narrator slides us out of this mental snakepit as easily as in, and we see the slave catcher from the outside, motioning some passing "Negroes" (148) still with his rifle, then seeing the nephew reappear with the news that their quarry is in back. The slave catcher dismounts and moves to the right of the house with the sheriff, the nephew and schoolteacher taking the left. Then, with no warning except diction, we're back in the slave catcher's thought processes, as he sees Stamp Paid ("A crazy old nigger") and Baby Suggs ("Crazy, too, probably . . . fanning her hands as though pushing cobwebs out of her way")

(149). He sees them all staring at a shed, sees the nephew take the ax from "the old nigger boy" (149). Then, click, we're back outside as "all four started toward the shed" (149).

The next paragraph, the one which reveals the bloody event at the heart of this book, is especially subtle, as it is centered in something like a group white consciousness, as all four white men understand at one time what has happened in the shed:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels with the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere -- in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at -- the old nigger boy, still mewing, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arch of its mother's swing. (149)

Some of the diction in this is recognizably the slave catcher's, some more likely schoolteacher's ("infant," "tried to connect," "arch of [the] swing"), but it is almost all from the viewpoint of the white world that has driven Sethe to this, and will judge her because of it. The only exception is the aside spoken by the omniscient narrator in

a poetic voice at the frozen moment of recognition: "in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at." This rhythmic evasion of description is more poignant than any actual description could be. Medea always kills her children offstage.

As if to add insult to injury, next Morrison takes us inside schoolteacher's mind, to whom it is clear right away "that there was nothing there to claim." Although this is written in the third person, it is evident that we are inside schoolteacher's head as he does a quick little inventory of his damaged property, and regrets the ruination of a well-trained slave who can make "fine ink, damn good soup" and has at least ten years left to breed. He ponders on the nephew who did the ruining, how he had to chastise him, "telling him to think -- just think --what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. Or Chipper, or Samson. Suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway." (149) The sentiments and the awkward rhythms are both certainly his, and he knows that this property is past redemption. Schoolteacher's only glad spot is that he left that wasteful nephew home to fend for

himself and Mrs. Garner, and that he certainly would learn a lesson from all this waste.

We go from schoolteacher's center of consciousness to that of the nephew who is there, "the one who had nursed her while his brother held her down" (150). He says twice to himself and once out loud, "'What she want to go and do that for?'" (150). He thinks it is because of the beating and that he himself would never do such a thing because of a beating; he'd just smash the well bucket or toss a few rocks at the dog. But there's no way he could do what she's done. The rhythms and redundancies of this paragraph perfectly match the thought and speech patterns of a startled, ignorant boy who has no understanding of what has transpired.

We are jerked back outside by the sheriff's voice as he sends the other three on their way. As they leave we are shifted to their threesome viewpoint that is in a way analogous to the blended voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved later on:

Enough nigger eyes for now. Little nigger-boy eyes open in sawdust; little nigger-girl eyes staring between the wet fingers that held her face so her head wouldn't fall off; little nigger-baby eyes crinkling up to cry in the arms of the old nigger

whose own eyes were nothing but slivers looking down at his feet. But the worst ones were those of the nigger woman who looked like she didn't have any. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were as black as her skin, she looked blind. (150)

These are not the thoughts of any one of them, but the perceptions of all. Eye imagery is scattered all through Beloved, but the concentration here is a reversal of all the other eyes that are emblems of the human spirit and heart. These are the eyes of the dead and maimed, observed coldly by white eyes.

The focus shifts to the inside of the sheriff's mind at this point, and as if to prove that not all white people are the same, he shows a surprising delicacy of feeling. At first he just wants to back out, and then he feels cold, chilled by the extremity of what has been done. He treats Sethe gently, speaks to her kindly, and is at a total loss what to do. He is saved from decision by "The nigger with the flower in her hat" (151). Even a gentle-souled sheriff is heir to the prejudice and vernacular of his time and race.

After a break in the text that seems to separate her from all the white consciousness that has gone before, Baby

Suggs starts coping with the situation, the first person who has made a positive move since Stamp Paid saved Denver. She notices "who breathed and who did not and went straight to the boys lying in the dirt" (151). Stamp Paid starts trying to get Sethe to give him the dead child, and the sheriff wisely lets them take charge. They get the children and Sethe into the house to take care of them. All of this is told in a very matter of fact, flat-toned third person voice, not from anybody's viewpoint in particular. The emotion is in the events, which do not need filtering to have their impact. The narrator is showing us what anybody could see, and what we see is horrific enough. The consciousness here is that of shared humanity. We hear Baby Suggs whisper "'Beg your pardon, I beg your pardon'" (152) over and over as she tends to the hurt little boys. We see her getting Sethe to release the dead child's body with the only argument that would work: "'It's time to nurse your youngest'" (152). The urge to give that symbolic milk moves Sethe to give up her burden, and Baby Suggs takes the child's body to the appropriately named keeping room. When she comes back she finds Sethe "aiming a bloody nipple into the baby's mouth" (152) and fights with her to prevent it,

but is not able to. The sheriff comes back to take Sethe away, and we see her through the eyes of her black neighbors:

Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once . . . Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold her and speed her on her way. (152)

Black consciousness has seen and judged Sethe also, not just for her crime, but for the pride they judge to be within her, isolating her from the community. They have already suspected the inhabitants of 124 of this, as indicated by their failure to warn them about the four horsemen, and this is the start of Sethe's twenty year exile.

There is a break in the text after this, as if to separate Baby Suggs from the black group consciousness, and then she comes out to try to save Denver from her mother and jail. We briefly see the desperation in her mind as she "means to run, to skip down the porch steps after the cart, screaming, No. No. Don't let her take that last one too" (152). She, and we, are stopped by a couple of inconsequential white children who bring shoes to be repaired, and are completely blind and deaf to the trouble

in the yard or Baby Suggs' face. She goes back to her helpless murmuring: "'I beg your pardon. Lord, I beg your pardon. I sure do.'" (153) This is the last thing we hear through the shared humanity third-person consciousness. The last thing we see is that the hot sun has dried the blood on Sethe's dress, "stiff, like rigor mortis" (153). This simile is a touch of the omniscient, a reference to the death of the spirit all this may bring, as well as to the actual death we have witnessed.

These five compact pages show how tightly Morrison organizes the method in her seeming madness, as this brief text moves through the minds of five separate people, three different groups of people, a third-person narrator who could be ordinarily human, and an omniscient narrator with a poetic sensibility. The remarkable thing is that none of this is obtrusive, as Morrison weaves it all together to create a seamless web of multiple consciousness centers, figures of speech, types of diction, and rhythms of speech to pull us, her readers, directly into the story. We are not told so much as caused to feel, in one way after another. The aesthetic and emotional reverberations are endless and intense.¹⁵ As Linda Anderson says, there is "not only space

for Morrison's imagination but for the reader's as well. Morrison has seen a need in all her novels to move away from narrative closure." (138) And as Morrison herself said in an interview with Kay Bonetti, "I want to shift the emphasis away from a need for a closed door. I want the door open because I want the reader to think about it." She makes sure that we do.¹⁶

The narrative strategies of Beloved provide room for the reader to enter in, for the spacious ambiguity that has long characterized the poetry we take for our own. If we knew what Frost glimpsed shining white in the well in "For Once, Then, Something," or why Robinson's Richard Cory went home and put a bullet through his head, we would not be half so intrigued, nor return to them time and again. Nor would we without the specific details, the images that make us care about the poems in the first place. Both spacious ambiguity and specific detail are necessary for the most compelling poetry of our century, and both are hallmarks of Beloved. This is not a story to pass on.

Endnotes

1. The relationship of milk to Sethe's life experience has been mentioned by many critics in passing, but Barbara Offutt Mathieson in her psychological study "Memory and Mother Love in Beloved" probably has the most succinct summation: "The primary material manifestation of emotional exchange in Beloved is mother's milk, which is cherished, offered, stolen, and remembered as a tangible emblem of nurturant love. For Sethe, the milk her own fieldhand mother was forbidden to give her rankles in memory as the oldest of her wounds. When she herself fled slavery, nine months [sic] pregnant, the milk streaming from her nursing breasts provided the impetus to persevere, reminding her always that she had to get that milk to her baby. The memory of the milk violently wrested from her breasts by the mossy-toothed nephew of Schoolmaster [sic] haunts Sethe, continually recalling the brutal degradations foisted upon a female slave and her own inability to provide her children freely with all that the milk embodied: nurturance, care, and life itself." (10-11) Mathieson continues this overview with a discussion of Sethe's recognition of Beloved as her daughter

as they share the sweetened milk after skating, closing with the caveat that "Intimate union becomes an incipient struggle for domination." (11)

Barbara Schapiro has an even more intense psychological interpretation of the role of milk in Sethe's life, that she "was emotionally starved of a significant nurturing relationship, of which the nursing milk is symbolic. That relationship is associated with one's core being or essence; if she has no nursing milk to call her own, she feels without a self to call her own. Thus even before she was raped [sic] by the white farm boys, Sethe was ravaged as an infant, robbed of her milk/essence by the white social structure." (198) Schapiro goes on to expand this view into other areas of the story, seeking to prove that "The primal nursing relationship is so fraught with ambivalence that frequently in the novel satiation leads to disaster" (199).

Christina Davis, however, suggests that milk can also be the herald of good tidings, calling Sethe's post-skating milk-sharing with Denver and Beloved "the symbolic peak of interaction among the three women and their search for identity: from this moment on they will move toward a redefinition which implies a positive individuality." (155)

2. Toni Morrison has said that Sethe "was not permitted to be a mother, and that is such an elemental desire," and that the only person in a position to judge her would be her murdered daughter, "because you knew a woman like that would be haunted by what she had done." (Kastor B12)

3. "The beloved other has the power to give to the self its own essential wholeness. The role of the other here is neither as an object to possess nor even as a mirror for the self; as a 'friend of [the] mind,' the other is a subject in its own right, with an inner life that corresponds with that of the self. In such correspondence, in that mutuality of inner experience and suffering, lies the self-confirming and consoling power of the relationship." (Schapiro 207-08)

4. "In order to exist for oneself, one has to exist for an other." (Benjamin 53)

5. "Contemporary research on treatment for post-traumatic stress syndrome indicates that support and caring

from others can help victims to heal, but that the most crucial part of healing is the unavoidable confrontation with the original trauma and feeling the pain again (Brown). Beloved enacts that theory. Sethe and Paul D are able to help each other to a point, but until they have intimate contact with the original pain and the feelings it created that had to be suppressed, they cannot be purged of its paralyzing effect." (Bowers 64)

6. Paul D's denial is both understandable and forgivable when his very creator says that Beloved is "about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember." ("The Pain of Being Black" 120) One of the large points of the book is that he may never want to remember, but he must if he is to survive and go on.

7. Critics are largely united in their admiration of Paul D. Doreatha Mbalia points out that Paul D is by the far the best of Morrison's major men: "In regard to women he is characterized as a man who has never mistreated a woman in his life and as a man who is grateful to women for his

life. He is described as Christ-like on occasion, at least in his manner toward women . . . It is his presence at 124 Bluestone that forces the necessary purgative confrontation between Sethe, the community, and Beloved. . . . He is, in fact, the only major male protagonist in the Morrisonian canon who has a positive relationship with a female and, furthermore, who struggles with a female to forge this positive relationship . . . based on a common history and a common struggle that both shared at Sweet Home." (93-4)

Many critics also refer to the tobacco tin as an image central to understanding Paul D. Michelle Collins uses it in developing her argument that Morrison writing is magical realism which "as an emerging genre interrogates and expands our traditional notions of the relationship of language and narrative, especially fictional narrative, to the 'real' world; specifically, it challenges our conception of reality and the function of narrative in creating rather than simply transparently representing an already established, knowable real world." (680) Rosellen Brown disagrees with Collins' general thesis -- "This is not exactly 'magic [sic] realism,' as some have called it" (418) -- but agrees that

Paul D's reconsideration of the past is necessary to Sethe's own resolution of it.

Brian Finney discusses the tobacco tin as an image that marks the three sections of the book. In the first Paul D has come to no real terms with the past and the tin is locked away tightly, to be sprung open by the incursion of the past into the present in the form of Beloved. In the second section Paul D must deal with the consequences of having his tin spilled out, and make "movement toward understanding and eventual forgiveness" (31). In the third it does not appear at all because "The past has been finally laid to rest -- not forgotten but defused, deprived of its ability to dominate and diminish the present." (31)

Rachel Hadas presents the tobacco tin as one of the central images of the work because it represents one of the central truths: "Paul D., [sic] scarred by years of suffering during and after slavery, thinks of his heart as a locked tobacco tin whose contents are shriveled -- better to keep it shut. All the characters in this novel bear physical or psychic scars, usually both; Morrison is probing the price of survival. The truth reopens wounds; the suffering is terrible, but there is no alternative to knowing. Beloved

is an extended excursus on the impossibility of forgetting" (315).

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy constructs a view of Beloved "Somewhere between Wordsworth and Freud" (300) in its emphasis on primal scenes and anamnesis, on the "rememories" that Paul D and Sethe must experience, "Paul in order to open the rusty lid of the tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be (72-32), Sethe in order to quiet that spite haunting her mind, in order to make a future that is not haunted by the past. Their tomorrow is what they will have when they forget Beloved, the girl who was killed so she would not have to die, the story that is told so it may be disremembered: 'This is not a story to pass on.'" (321)

The view of Paul D that has most in common with my own is Barbara Schapiro's: "Paul D is the one character in the novel who has the power to resist and disrupt the destructive, narcissistic mother-child dyad. . . . His power lies precisely in his maternal, nurturing quality; he is that 'other' with the power to recognize and affirm the inner or essential self. . . . Paul D has the power to satisfy the craving that fuels the novel, the craving to be

'known,' to have one's existence sanctioned by the empathic recognition of the other." (204-05) It is Paul D, in Schapiro's opinion, who gives the ending its hopeful cast, as he "does not want to merge or incorporate Sethe's story into his own . . . rather, he wants to 'put his story next to hers.' This suggests again an essential maintenance of boundaries, a balance of two like but separate selves, an attunement." (208) Indeed it does.

8. Mathieson's overall evaluation of the basic dilemma of Beloved is focused squarely on the mother-child relationship that she considers to be the thematic center of the book: "The mother-infant dyad, the most elemental of all interpersonal bondings, is renowned for its ability to generate an outpouring of tender ecstasy matched only by the concomitant reverberations of anger and guilt. Infant need and maternal care reciprocate so intensely, many psychologists believe, that they blur the distinction between child and parent. Yet within the intimate web lurk terrors and traumas. Toni Morrison's fifth novel, Beloved, charts the explosive intricacies of the preoedipal bond from the simultaneous perspective of mother and child. Morrison

explores their mutual hunger for a loving union as well as the inevitable struggle for control. This powerful portrait, in turn, serves as the metaphor upon which Morrison grounds her meditation on personal memory and historical self-awareness. Still haunted by slavery, her African-American characters confront an overwhelming legacy of psychological scars. Morrison orchestrates maternal tensions and memory's pain so that each mirrors the other's anguish and ambivalence. A shared avenue for hope and growth emerges from this unlikely pairing." (1) It is worth noting that this mirroring to which Mathieson draws our attention is structurally analogous to the mirroring that was pandemic in The Bluest Eye.

9. "Morrison spins the story off center, exposing in degrees the terror at the heart of Beloved, allowing Sethe what Morrison calls 'a second chance.' It is the last chance not to be murdered herself by unappeasable guilt and sorrow; a chance to recover her self-love, and the love of Paul D. [sic], her lover . . . Sethe, close to death . . . can only be saved by finding her own words again, moving out of

silence not into pious acceptance but into open grieving."

(Bender 138-39)

10. "The mother is made incapable of recognizing the child, and the child cannot recognize its mother." (Schapiro 197)

11. Barbara Hill Rigney has a useful permutation of this idea of attempted engulfment: "The merging of identities in the preoedipal bonding of the female triad is universal in Morrison's work, but most pronounced in Beloved, the relationship among Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver giving way to that inverted trinity of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved . . . The first thing we learn of Beloved's manifested presence at 124 Bluestone Road is the shattered mirror (3), highly significant as a prefiguration of the shattering and merging of identities that will occur throughout the novel. . . . Denver is the first to sense the melting of identity, the merging that is her love for Beloved, whose blood she has drunk 'right along with my mother's milk' (205). Believing that Beloved has left her and returned to her otherworldly existence, Denver realizes 'she has no self. . . . She can feel her thickness thinning,

dissolving into nothing . . . ' (123). Beloved, too, finds herself melting, surrealistically disintegrating, as she surprises herself by pulling out one of her own teeth . . . Beloved is, finally, 'exploded right before their eyes' (263) according to community women, but not before there has occurred a merging of voices and minds, as well as of bodies . . . It requires all of Paul D's strength and all the power of a community of women to separate this triad, to disperse the ghost, to save Sethe's life, and to return Denver to a 'real' world." (48-9)

Rosellen Brown adds a rather charming counterpoint to this when she says that "her astonishing presence is unlike that of any character [sic] in American fiction. Beloved is a ghost and yet she has a body; she has fears, which we see from within. But she also has needs too voracious to be borne: she is there to settle a score, and to do that she will suck the love and concern out of the others as if it were air, no matter how she may suffocate them in the act. In a scene of extraordinary, eerie poignancy, Beloved loses a tooth and suddenly thinks she could just as easily drop an arm, a hand, a toe, could find herself in pieces. This is a ghost who dreams . . . We feel about this vulnerable girl,

at least at first, as we might about a benign extraterrestrial" (418).

12. Rebecca Ferguson says that "Beloved's first stream of ideas, impressions, recollections is . . . complex in its shifting of pronouns, identities, and bodily parts; hers is an open, seeking, concentrated language of elision, approaching most nearly Julia Kristeva's concept of the pre-Oedipal 'semiotic.'" (116-17)

Kristeva characterizes this semiotic as "a divided subject, even a pluralised subject, that occupies, not a place of enunciation, but permutable, multiple, and mobile places" (Desire in Language 111). This describes not only the language of Beloved, but largely that of Beloved as well.

13. According to Mae G. Henderson, "the narrator's final and thrice-repeated enjoinder resonates with ambivalence and ambiguity. Suggesting that which is absent is not necessarily 'gone,' . . . the narrator's closing reflections ensure the novel's open-endedness subverting any monologic reading of the final injunction." (83)

14. "Tout texte se construit comme mosaïque de citations, tout texte est absorption et transformation d'un autre texte." (Kristeva Semiotike 146) Kristeva is, of course, referring to text in the larger sense of any system of communication, including all those that make up life itself.

15. Barbara Hill Rigney expands upon this well:
"Reverberation is that quality which characterizes all of Morrison's fiction -- what is left unsaid is equally as important as what is stated and specified; what is felt is as significant as what is experienced; what is dreamed is as valid as what transpires in the world of 'fact' . . . there are no polarities between logic and mysticism, between real and fantastic . . . experience for Morrison's characters is the acceptance of a continuum, a recognition that the mind is not separate from the body or the real separate from what the imagination can conceive." (26) This same continuum exists for Morrison's readers as well, especially in Beloved.

16. As John Leonard says, "Beloved belongs on the highest shelf of our literature even if half a dozen canonized Wonder Bread Boys have to be elbowed off." (715)

CHAPTER THREE: ALL THAT JAZZ

Reviewers as far apart geographically and otherwise as Richard Eder of the Los Angeles Times Book Review and Lorna Sage of the Times Literary Supplement have hailed Jazz as the rightful successor to Beloved, basing their opinions on internal evidence as well as Morrison's public statements that these are the first two parts of a projected trilogy that will "make the dry and disconnected bones of the black historical past live" (McDowell 3). Eder holds that Jazz is not only a thematic and structural sequel to Beloved, but actually "surpasses it" because "Nearly as heart-stopping in its intensity, it is on the whole a freer and sunnier book." (3) In Sage's opinion, Jazz "shares some uncanniness" with Beloved, and also "its central and most disturbing theme -- what you might call the murder of love, the loving murder, always a form of infanticide" (21). Deborah McDowell of the Women's Review of Books points out that not only has Toni Morrison "promised that Beloved's life and quest would be a part of Jazz," but that both books are centered on "the workings of Memory -- of change, of loss, of grief, of

abandonment, of being 'junkheaped,' as Sethe puts it in Beloved." (3) David Nicholson of the Washington Post Book World recognizes Jazz as the second in a cycle of novels in which Morrison intends to explore black life and the nature of love, but feels that it is too much a mix of high and low styles, "like a sweet potato pie topped with whipped cream and Grand Marnier" (1), and ends up being "testimony to the limits of language and unconventional narrative forms" (1). Whatever their evaluations of the book's success, these four reviewers are certain that there is a web of artistic membrane stretching from one book to the other, a living aesthetic connection discernible with or without the writer's overt aid.

This makes it all the stranger that at least sixteen other reviewers fail to notice the connection at all, or at least do not mention it in their discussions of Jazz.¹ Of these others, only one, Lee Lescaze of the Wall Street Journal, actively dislikes Jazz; three are ambivalent, and the other twelve are ecstatic to have it in existence. Adulation flows like champagne: Morrison is a "snake charmer of the language" (Moose F5); the book is "brilliant, daring" (Dorris 1), or "entrancing" (Diehl 39); "her art burns

through her artifice" (Gates 66). Even the criticism of the ambivalent reviewers is nested in feathers: "Morrison's writing can be as shiny, soft, and pretty as rain, but it can also sweep away her characters . . . In the end, Jazz is less about words that it is about music" (Koenig 78). This could be called praising with faint damnation. Even David Nicholson says Jazz "is beautifully written, filled with powerful, visionary language" (1). Clearly, the overwhelming majority of professional readers like Jazz; but are they right? Can we trust them if they don't see a connection as basic as that between Beloved and Jazz? Or is the aesthetic connection so obvious that they don't feel a need to point it out? Or so subtle and intrinsic? Finding answers to these questions will tell us a great deal about what our own appraisals of Jazz might be. The places to look are where we have already found much of the strength of Beloved: in the figurative language and in the narrative structure.

As we have already discovered, Toni Morrison in Beloved strings groups of metaphorical images up and down like the beads of an abacus to create coherent human personality patterns, resulting in people that we can believe in and feel with, such as Sethe and Paul D. Sometimes she lines up

only one concentrated image pattern, like birds on a wire, as when she creates a pure hero: Sixo. Sometimes she turns the figurative language inside out and makes a being such as Beloved, who is a crazy house of mirrors for the other characters, besides being Something in herself that has caused much difference of opinion among readers. In every case, though, metaphor patterns serve to create the indwelling patterns of proclivity and personal experience that constitute a recognizably sentient entity. Even though the house, 124 Bluestone, is given a life and sentience of sorts, it is only through the consciousness of the living or once-living. Morrison's metaphorical mosaics create and serve specific human existences.

This is not the case in Jazz. The characters in this book are apt to be built from telling details that recur, but do not necessarily gain more emotional freight. We know from the beginning that Joe Trace has eyes that do not match, although Felice evokes them best near the end of the book: "Mr. Trace looks at you. He has double eyes. Each one a different color. A sad one that lets you look inside him, and a clear one that looks inside you." (Jazz 206. All page references are to this edition.) We know that Violet is

worried about being too thin, trying to regain the bottom she seems to have lost somewhere, as the heavy food she cooks in her "determination to grow an ass she swore she once owned was killing" Joe (69). Dorcas is marked in our minds by her creamy, sugar-flawed skin. Wild is black with strong white teeth, Golden Gray is, well, golden, Felice is as dark as Dorcas is creamy, and nobody else has any particular visage or characteristic. This is not a book in which even the main characters are clearly visible, nor do they leave the same experiential imprint that Sethe, Paul D, and company do. Although we do suffer with them, it is not with them specifically or individually, so much as with them as prototypes of their roles. Joe Trace is the good man who needs more reality than he has, Violet is the woman with feelings too strong to contain, and Dorcas is the posturing, self-absorbed other woman who also contains a germ of true feeling and tragedy. Malvonne represents the community that cooperates but also judges, Alice is one of those down-home women who have stiffened up (like Geraldine of The Bluest Eye), and Felice is the innocent who carries the possibility of righting the world gone topsy-turvy.

If these roles sound familiar, they should, as what is

Joe Trace but Paul D in another guise? Not for nothing is Joe Trace a man all women like, and born in 1873, the same year 124 Bluestone comes to a boil. The violent emotions of Sethe and Violet carry them both to extremities of action, to the chagrin of the community. Dorcas is eighteen, awful, poignant, and different touchstones of meaning to various people. Violet gets out of bed at night to look at Dorcas's picture and sees one thing, Joe gets out and sees another, and Felice sees her a whole other way. Who can this be but our Beloved? (Wild has more than a touch of Beloved as well.) Malvonne is reminiscent of Ella with her strange blend of helpfulness and judgment passing, and Alice Manfred recalls Lady Jones as well as Geraldine in her need to do right, to act right; or perhaps Baby Suggs in her fear that the world has forsaken God, if not the other way around. Felice, like Denver, is the potential bringer of light, the person young enough and strong enough to effect change, to help save what there is to be saved.

Besides these similarities in basic nature, there are also many parallels in personal history. Joe's deepest wound comes from his lack of parentage, from his uncertainty about Wild as his mother, and a father whose identity is too

obscure even to be considered. This recalls Paul D's statement that he never got to know his mother, and has no idea who his father was. Joe's assumption of Trace for a name because his birth family supposedly left without a trace is not that different from Paul D Garner, one of a series of Pauls (A,D,F) named with a twisted sense of humor by somebody, perhaps their owner who gave them his last name as a hand-me-down. This lack of identity causes the terrible need that comes on them in middle life to capture deep meaning before it is too late and results in Paul D sleeping with Beloved, Joe with Dorcas. Both are compassionate, decent men that women love and trust automatically, and who betray the trust of the women they love most to work out a fate that brings them back closer to those women. Joe and Violet talking under the covers at the end, understanding their deep love, are Paul D and Sethe a little farther down the line, after she has begun to believe what he helps her to know: that she is her own best thing.

Sethe and Violet are both women who have seen their mothers humiliated and finally killed by the power of the white world. Their need to have mothers is mirrored by their need to be mothers. This is the driving motive of Sethe's

life, causing her to kill her baby girl because she can protect her no other way. Violet denies the mother-need in herself for years, enduring two miscarriages and an abortion, because she knows it is an unsafe, too-deep love, as Paul D says Sethe's is. Nonetheless, "mother-hunger. . . hit[s] her like a hammer" (108) at age fifty, and she ends up sleeping with a doll in her arms, confounding her husband no end. When she tries to cut dead Dorcas's face, perhaps her anguish is as much for her child that could have been as for Joe's unfaithfulness. Certainly she makes a child of sorts out of Dorcas's memory, and welcomes the chance to take Felice into their family. Violet and Sethe are also both expelled from the embrace of the community because of the pride they're perceived pride to have. In the end, Violet and Sethe are both given a second chance to make a life, a true family, once they have faced their demons.

Dorcas and Beloved have similar childhoods in that each suffers terribly and becomes isolated through no fault of her own. Beloved first loses her mother, regains her, is finally killed by her, and sent to the unspeakable isolation of death. When she returns, she is voracious for life, even at the expense of her mother's love for Paul D and Sethe's

very sanity. Dorcas's father is stomped to death in the race riots of East St. Louis, and her mother burned alive in their house five days later. Dorcas is left in the hands of her Aunt Alice, a woman too afraid to live herself, let alone help a scarred child find the way back. Dorcas has a voracious appetite for life also, as evidenced by her burning need for love, worked out in part with Joe, almost at the cost of Violet's sanity. This love is not enough, as Paul D's isn't for Beloved, and Dorcas needs more. A thousand Actons could not fill the bottomless well of her need, as a thousand Paul D's cannot fill Beloved's. The only thing for her to do is what Beloved did: disappear. Dorcas lets herself die not out of error or to protect Joe, but because she does not have the strength to live in the face of her own pain. The only remedies known by Beloved and Dorcas are not enough to keep them existent.

Assuming that Morrison is not out to save the earth by recycling her characters, there must be some reason for these deep-seated echoes and reverberations. Perhaps there is no particular reason for these lead characters to be individuals, as the aesthetic infrastructure of this book is not to build individuals who are representative of something

larger, but to go straight to the something larger. Paul Gray says that Jazz never really accounts for Joe and Violet's perfidies, "That they have suffered -- from white racism, poverty -- is made abundantly clear. Their individual motives for lashing out as they do are not." (70) Morrison does not mean to, as she does not agree with Gray that "Great fiction explains the inexplicable." (70) Nothing she has ever said in or about her fiction suggests that she feels a need to provide answers, and there is much evidence to the contrary, as we have already seen. Lorna Sage comes much closer to formulating Morrison's basic motive when she says that Morrison is

surely right that there are ways of writing that instigate and invite meanings to multiply, texts which -- by leaving gaps and freeing up cross-associations of imagery -- encourage pre-texts and sub-texts and contexts to surface in the reader's mind. She assumes that reading is going to be a complicated adventure. (21)

These are the "places and spaces" for reader participation Morrison says she will provide (Russell 44), and there are plenty of them in Jazz. If Morrison makes characters that do not hold our attention by being something totally new, different, and deep, it is because she has another game

afoot. If she does not infuse these characters with her deepest creative energy, her brilliant use of figurative language, it is because she has focused this energy elsewhere. The title suggests where: the emphasis in this book is sound, overriding all else.

If the proper study of mankind is man, then the proper study of Jazz readers is jazz. This is what Morrison brings to the table this time that is different. In The Bluest Eye she makes a child's madness out of the madness of the world. In Beloved she creates living, breathing people who stand for the anguish of their race lacerated by slavery. In Jazz Morrison tries pure alchemy: the transmutation of one artform into another, the translation of music onto the page in the form of words, to be changed back in the reader's inner ear. Almost all of our twenty-two critics have noticed this, at least subconsciously, as there are very few who do not use musical terms to describe this book.²

Perhaps the first thing we need to do is to agree what we mean by jazz. As the poet Hayden Carruth says, there is certainly "some functional analogy among the arts . . . the problem is to define it, to discriminate precisely what can be translated from one artistic medium to another" (26), but

a major problem is that "Some people can hear jazz, and others, by far the greater number, cannot." (26) Although Carruth has no faith that jazz can be taught to the psychically deaf, it can be grasped at least in part by studying its basic form. Since this suits our needs, we will follow his short presentation to its conclusion, beginning with his statement that "Every characteristic of jazz to which the critics can point can be found in other musics." (27) The swinging quality many people think of as jazz's distinguishing mark, formed by coming in just ahead or behind the beat, also occurs in many other music forms, including flamenco, Gypsy, African, and Oriental. What's more, that "swinging propulsive quality" (28) can be found in the predictable, ordinary rhythms of composers as varied as Bach and the Rolling Stones. Rich, layered texturing is also thought of as a jazz hallmark, but the truth is that "textural expressiveness is part of all music," (28) an "inseparable and integral" (28) characteristic of music of all times and places. Even "slurs, glides, intentional muffs and clinkers" (29), though more abundant in jazz, are not peculiar to it: witness Paganini, Ravel, Mahler, European folk music, and Chinese opera. Carruth goes on to say that

these "extrinsic embodiments" (29) have left their mark on his poetry, but that it is the formal idea of jazz that has left the deepest impression on his work. He considers the essence of jazz to be "spontaneous improvisation within a fixed and simple form" (29), and goes on to elaborate that the improvisation can be that of a solo instrument with a rhythm section, or successive solo improvisations that are a "linear evolution of themes and ideas involving all musicians of the ensemble, each in turn" (29). In Carruth's own poetry this has taken the form of "interfusion" of "thematic improvisation" and "metrical predictability" (30), and he hopes that the predictability is "forgotten quickly in the onrush of . . . the overriding improvisation" (31). Carruth feels that even poetry is second best to jazz, because jazz best provides the elements of "freedom and discipline that are the perennial and universal conditions for artistic creation; they are the two pillars on which all aesthetics stand." (31) This is an excellent short characterization of jazz, and even the most casual reader would notice how well Jazz fits its tenets. Narrative voice in this book is certainly analogous to instrumentation, and, as we as we shall see, there are many more instruments than

one. The use of the characters' voices as solo instruments is readily apparent, and there is even something corresponding to a rhythm section. Improvisation, of course, may be the one word that describes Jazz best. All this will become much more intelligible as we investigate the narrative structure of the book, but first we need to feel sure that we have some grasp of jazz's spirit as well as its form. Perhaps the best way to do this would be to timetravel to the Savoy Ballroom in 1926, but short of that we can take the word of some of the people who were there.

Leonard Feather and Nat Hentoff are two of the most prolific and esteemed jazz writers ever. Their works stretch across much of the twentieth century jazz scene, and between them they have known almost everybody worth knowing and heard almost everything worth hearing. Anybody serious about jazz should read some of their voluminous writing, but we can dip out little tastes that let us know that the land of Jazz did not spring full-grown from Toni Morrison's head.

The old Savoy Ballroom was one of Leonard Feather's haunts, along with the Onyx, the Famous Door, and the Hickory House, all strung between 52nd Street and Lenox Avenue. He, like many other serious jazz lovers, avoided the

Cotton Club because of their racist policy of admitting blacks only as comics, musicians, dancers, and servants. What he found in the true jazz clubs, rent parties, and midnight jam sessions was a sense of "community" (17), of a group of people united by a common joy and common sorrow, expressed through the medium of jazz. Although Feather was born an Englishman, he was so entranced by this sense of belonging to something larger than himself that he chose to stay in this country and make himself an integral part of the jazz community. He was chosen to participate in the party thrown at the White House for Duke Ellington's seventieth birthday, and "Even the fact that the President was Richard M. Nixon could not quell [his] enthusiasm." (2) Feather was pleased to be part of this apotheosis of an artform that had long been despised and denied by many white Americans, and even looked down on as "race music" by some of the race which created it. He celebrates the new directions jazz has taken at the same time that he commemorates the immortal music of five or six decades ago, because it is all based on improvisation, all dedicated to being new, fresh, and courageous. His work gives us a factual sense of how fresh and new it all was in the

twenties and thirties that complements the emotional truth of the era that Morrison seeks to create in Jazz.

Nat Hentoff is of a slightly later era, but also makes it clear as Feather that jazz is as much a way of looking at life as it is a form of music. He quotes famous jazzman Whitney Balliett as saying that jazz is the "'sound of surprise'" (Jazz Life 15), which has a lot to do with the improvisational quality, and also with the realization that just about anything can and will happen in life. True Belle's loud laugh at the birth of the anomalous Golden Gray is echoed in a story Hentoff repeats from the pianist Red Garland. When Garland first heard Charlie Parker innovating away on a jukebox in Dallas, he said, "'I just laughed out loud . . . He made me feel so good.'" (Jazz Life 15) Jazz is also delight in making it new, in helping some whole new thing come into the world, or just knowing that can happen.

The darker side of the jazz life, represented in Jazz by Joe Trace shooting Dorcas at the houseparty, is mirrored by an incident Hentoff himself witnessed as a teenager at a dance where Duke Ellington was playing. A man was knifed directly in front of the bandstand, and no player made the slightest break, least of all current soloist Johnny Hodges,

whose alto sax never wavered. As one player explained, "after a while, it takes a lot to surprise or startle you" (Jazz Life 25). The fact that no one but Felice gets too upset about Dorcas's demise would not surprise anyone who has lived in this world.

Jazz is not just about surprise, newness, and violence, of course. An element of gentle wistfulness is one of the chief characteristics of Jazz, especially imbuing the tone of the woman narrator. It has also imbued the blues from the very beginning, and largely the lives of many players. Even successes as grand as Louis Armstrong have a deep reservoir of pain, as illustrated by a story his wife told Hentoff about the first Christmas tree Louis Armstrong ever had. They were on the road and she set up a little tree in their hotel room. When he came in from playing at three in the morning, he lay awake for hours looking at the tree, "his eyes just like a baby's eyes would watch something" (Jazz Life 26). He was forty years old, and they hauled that tree around to one-night-stands for a month. The deprivation and deep pain here are surely kin to that of Violet watching Rose Dear fade away, or Joe Trace looking for his mother, or Dorcas worn out as a little girl. And it's all there in

jazz. In Jazz.

Jazz is also about the "'urgency of personal discovery,'" in Sahib Shihab's words to Hentoff (Jazz Life 45). Shihab had been warned of the possibility of loss of this quality by Thelonious Monk, who said

Music is a language of the emotions. If someone has been escaping reality, I don't expect him to dig my music . . . my music is alive and it's about the living and the dead, about good and evil. It's angry, and it's real because it knows it's angry.

(Jazz Life 45)

The living, the dead, good, evil, anger: none of these qualities are sparse in the Jazz composed by Toni Morrison.

The sense of community that is so much a part of the City of Jazz finds an analog in Duke Ellington's explanation of how he came to write his "Harlem Air Shaft:"

You get the full sense of Harlem in an air shaft. You hear fights, you smell dinner, you hear people making love. You hear intimate gossip floating down. You hear the radio. An air shaft is one big loudspeaker.

(Jazz Is 250)³

Interconnected humanity is represented in both, as well as the endless variety of common human life. Morrison presents this in myriad permutations that are couched in language

that sings its own song. As Elsie Mayer puts it, "As an African American she is keenly aware that this musical form and the lives of her characters flow from a common source."

(258) The citizens of Morrison's City move down the street "among hundreds of others who moved the same way they did, and who, when they spoke . . . treated language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play" (Jazz 32-2). Together they walk the walk, talk the talk.

Sometimes, though, they become disconnected outwardly to become more connected farther in, as do "the men with the long-distance eyes" (Jazz 223), the street musicians Joe especially loves. Joe's adventures with Dorcas and return to Violet are a clear parallel to this going away to come back.

Frank Conroy, jazz pianist and writer, tells of his early experience with this phenomenon, working next to black shoeshine men in a subway station beneath Fourteenth Street in New York. These men, trapped in a terrible job in a terrible locale, protected themselves with "hip, elliptical" talk and a "long, steady staring off" (76). Their behavior was so focused, so self-contained that it seemed to "transcend the physical" (76), to liberate them from the constricting monotony. Conroy recognized this look when he

saw it again on the faces of the jazzmen he later played with in various Harlem clubs. He also learned something about the countless "riff and rituals" black people found necessary to survive life in the ghetto. "Fantasy of all kinds -- from playful to dangerous -- was in the very air of Harlem. It was the spice of uptown life." (77) Conroy understood the look to be the essence of jazz, of dance, of magic: of preservation of the inner self. Jazz and the active mind itself "embrace the tension of never being certain, never being absolutely sure, never being done" (80). Being based on a paradigm of this nature, Jazz is bound to fail readers like Paul Gray who want solid answers and certain conclusions. The essence of jazz -- of Jazz -- is the door left open that Morrison openly espouses in her 1983 interview with Nellie McKay:

Jazz always keeps you on edge. There is no final chord. There may be a long chord, but no final chord. And it agitates you. . . . There is something underneath [it] that is incomplete. There is always something else you want from the music. I want my books to be like that -- because I want that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more -- that you can't have it all right now. (429)⁴

Beloved is certainly characterized by this open-

endedness, as well as by a "fluidity of boundaries . . . a continually altering narrative perspective" (Schapiro 201), although some critics have tried to constrict this fluidity into "Bakhtinian ventriloquism," positing one narrator who "throws her voice" into the actual characters (Rodrigues 157): a concept hard to grasp at best. In our study of the sixteenth chapter we saw exactly how fluid those boundaries could be, as well as how they represented overlapping and concatenation of experience at times, and at times mental isolation. As intricate and subtle as Beloved is, Jazz is even more so. One thing missing is the metaphors as markers of persons and connectors of their actions. As we have already noticed, the characters of Jazz are not made this way, but depend upon evocative details and the reader's recognition of human patterns that bridge from book to book.

This is not to say that there are no patterns of imagery in Jazz, no metaphors building a rhetorical armature for Morrison to sculpt her story upon. If anything, the metaphors here are more intrinsic, more the very fabric of the book itself. The main difference lies in the basic use to which the metaphorical mosaics are put. In Beloved, the story is character-driven, and the metaphorical patterns are

the building blocks of the characters. Jazz is different in that it is driven by its very language, not its characters or its plot. The characters are eponymous, the plot is pretty much a standard blues story-line. The language partakes of everything we have learned about jazz: it swings, it often has a propulsive beat, it slurs, and clinks, and muffs, and doubles back on itself; it is sometimes sweet, sometimes painful, and occasionally dangerous. Jazz has a stated theme that variations are derived from, a great deal like jazz improvisation. At the end of each major section there is a bridge that ends one part and begins the next, exactly as in the basic jazz form, "each tale syncopating into the next with the beat of a word or idea" (Dorris 5). Much of the language is extremely rhythmic, a great deal of it scannable verse, and the levels of diction change according to the mood Morrison is setting, much as the featured solo instrument provides the textural effect desired. Indeed, human voices are used like instruments to vary both theme and mood. The patterns of imagery are used to tie the book together by setting the basic rhythm, since the recurrence of them is frequent and scattered through all sections. Narrative is effected in a

way that is itself a mimicry of jazz form; or, rather, an enactment or embodiment.⁵

In this book it is very difficult to separate the image patterns from the narrative voices because they are so deeply entwined that it is a lot like separating content and form. In Jazz Morrison moves a giant step ahead in her ongoing attempt to bring the two closer together, but the very closeness makes the elements hard to separate enough to talk about individually. As Anthony Hilfer says, "There are wonderful critical opportunities in the writings of Toni Morrison, but no simple key." (93) It is possible, however, to discern at least four basic patterns of imagery which are the basic chords of Jazz: language, light, the City, and, of course, music. These do all meld together, but we will look at a few examples of each separately to see how Morrison uses them to create a totality of effect.

One of the signs of Violet's dissolution under the force of her mother-need is her loss of her verbal ability, her "snatch-gossip tongue of a beautician" that can dress anybody up or down. The cracks in her life widen and she feels "the anything-at-all begin in her mouth. Words connected only to themselves pierced an otherwise normal

comment," as when she makes a client appointment and throws in "'Two o'clock if the hearse is out of the way.'" (23-4) This loss and misdirection of language is a signal of the missing factor in her life that drives her to desperate action; but first it makes her quit speaking to her husband.

When Joe turns to Dorcas it is because he can "tell his new love things he never told his wife" (36). He persuades Malvonne to let him rent Sweetness' room by telling her about Violet, "'But the quiet. I can't take the quiet. She don't hardly talk anymore.'" (49) Alice Manfred thinks of people who look down on her for her color in terms of language: "women who spoke English said, 'Don't sit there, honey, you never know what they have.' And women who knew no English at all and would never own a pair of silk stockings moved away if she sat down next to them on the trolley" (54). It seems the final insult to her that people who cannot even remotely handle the language feel they have a right to shun her. She herself does hear the language of the drums, and is afraid of it because it ties her to life whether she likes it or not. Music is undeniable even if she is denied by the human tongue. Alice much prefers reason.⁶

Dorcas loses her speech altogether when she endures her

childhood trauma, when her father

was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death, and Alice's sister had just got the news and had gone back home to try and forget the color of his entrails, when her house was torched and she burned crispy in its flames. (57)

The flip nonchalance of this horror in a nutshell is a linguistic version of long-distance eyes in that it is too serious to be stated seriously, too stark to need embellishment. It's no wonder that Dorcas "went to two funerals in five days, and never said a word" (57), and that the only real love she ever had afterwards was for a man who wanted both to listen to her and to talk to her. The only language that could penetrate her emotional deafness before Joe was the language of the drums, the music that operates below the sash. This music is all that can "penetrate Joe's sobs" (197), and in a way it is the real language of the book, the one that informs everybody from Alice to Violet of what they need. It is no wonder that people steeped in this music treat "language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play" (33).

As she lies dying, Dorcas is in a welter of language, torn between what other people want and what she herself is

experiencing. She knows they want her to say Joe's name "so they can go after him. Take away his sample case with Rochelle and Bernadine and Faye inside. I know his name but Mama won't tell." (193) She has mixed the parts of her life together, the dolls that burned up along with her mother now appearing in Joe's sample case, which is always present at their meetings, filled with presents for Dorcas. She will not betray Joe orally, but she cannot get over her primary loss, and she lets herself bleed to death for a combination of the two reasons. In any case she "won't tell." She will not betray their communion, nor speak her hurt. For her "the music is faint," but she knows the words "by heart" (193).

The resolution of Joe and Violet's mutual anguish is expressed in terms of language, in a passage lengthy but lyrical:

It's nice when grown people whisper to each other under the covers. Their ecstasy is more leaf-sigh than bray and the body is the vehicle, not the point. They reach, grown people, for something beyond, way beyond and way, way down underneath tissue. They are remembering while they whisper the carnival dolls they won and the Baltimore boats they never sailed on. The pears they let hang on the limb because if they plucked them, they would be gone from there and who else would see the ripeness if they took it away for themselves? How could anybody passing by see them and imagine for themselves what the flavor would be like? Breathing and murmuring under covers

both of them have washed and hung out on the line, in a bed they chose together and kept together nevermind one leg was propped on a 1916 dictionary, and the mattress, curved like a preacher's palm asking for witnesses in His name's sake, enclosed them each and every night and muffled their whispering, old-time love. They are under the covers because they don't have to look at themselves anymore; there is no stud's eye, no chippie's glance to undo them. They are inward toward the other, bound and joined by carnival dolls and the steamers that sailed from ports they never saw. That is what is beneath their undercover whispers.

(228)

This passage needs to be read as an entirety because it is a contained piece as surely as any musical composition. The whispering is the framework, the images the improvisations and elaborations, and the style is a mirror of the substance with its repetitious, sussurating quality. It is a double reed instrument with its air of pass and return, advance and retreat: an intimate dance for two. This is also a fine example of how difficult it is to discuss the language pattern in isolation from the musical basis of the book.

In the very last passage of the book language is the medium of the woman narrator's clearest statement about herself and her reaction to what has been going on. She is talking about the "public love" that is the concomitant of Joe and Violet's private love, and how much she envies them

being "able to say out loud what they have no need to say at all" (229). What she herself would like to say to someone is "That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else. . . . Talking to you and hearing you answer -- that's the kick." (229) These words are italicized in the text because they are so central to the woman narrator's longing, her own direct voice from her core. She goes straight on to betray her own pain, and perhaps some of her motivation for her fascination with the story of Joe, Violet, Dorcas, and Felice: "But I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life" (229). Clearly she would like to be able to speak words of true love with someone, as she adds "If I were able I'd say it." (229) However, what she has said speaks volumes about the relative importance of language in Jazz. This passage also speaks to the inextricability of the image patterns with questions of the narrative structure. Human talk cannot be separated from the human narrator talking.

The human voice is made up of air, also the natural milieu of light. If anything, light imagery is even more pervasive than that of speech, but we can get a good idea of

it from a few key examples.

When Violet temporarily steals a baby, she experiences an elation that brightens her when she needs it later, that recalls her earlier life both by comparison and contrast:

The memory of the light, however, that had skipped through her veins came back now and then, and once in a while, on an overcast day, when certain corners in the room resisted lamplight; when the red beans in the pot seemed to be taking forever to soften, she imagined a brightness that could be carried in her arms. Distributed, if need be, into places dark as the bottom of a well. (22)

This last is a reminder of Violet's mother Rose Dear casting herself into a well, a place that seemed so narrow and dark to Violet that she felt it almost a relief to see her lying in a comfortable coffin, at least open to the light. The antithesis of this claustrophobic horror is the continuation of life which a baby represents, and which Violet has put off too long to have one of her own. When Violet starts falling completely apart about this, it is expressed in terms of the cracking apart of the globe of light which contains the shape of her life for her, as it "holds and shapes each scene, and it can be assumed that at the curve where the light stops is a solid foundation" (22).

The light is not perfect anymore, and probably never has been, as "closely examined it shows seams, ill-glue cracks and weak places beyond which is anything. Anything at all."

(23) This is the same anything-at-all which gets into her tongue and tangles it, causing her to turn away from Joe, without whom she refuses to live "once she'd seen him taking shape in early light" (23). She thinks back on Joe as he was as "my Virginia Joe Trace who carried a light inside him" (96), but now she is caught fast in her own darkness.

The City itself takes shape from light, as with the citizen who falls in love with a woman sitting on a stoop dangling her shoe from one toe, enthralled by his reaction to "her posture, to soft skin on stone, the weight of the building stressing her delicate, dangling shoe" (34). He thinks it is the woman he wants, but he is wrong, it is the "combination of curved stone, and a swinging, high-heeled shoe moving in and out of sunlight" (34). He even knows he is deceived by "the tricks of shapes and light and movement" (34), but it doesn't matter because the deception is part of it too. It's that uptown Harlem fantasy Conroy speaks of, and it happens a thousand times each day, carved out of light and air and the sweetness of belonging to a community,

a City. Again, the image patterns necessarily converge.

In spite of his problematic origins, Golden Gray illuminates the lives of True Belle and Vera Louise: "he was like a lamp in that quiet, shaded house . . . they vied with each other for the light he shed on them" (139-40). The woman he finally brings his light to, Wild, who may or not be Joe's mother, has a private cave in the forest that Joe slides down into: "It was like falling into the sun. Noon light followed him like lava into a stone room where somebody cooked in oil" (183), quite likely Golden Gray, whose clothing is there, and who may be part of keeping Joe's birthright from him. Or maybe not.

Joe starts to heal from that loss and the concomitant loss of Dorcas on the prettiest day in spring, "On a day so pure and steady trees preened" (195). Joe is mourning at his window, watching the women come down the street and occasionally tripping because "they were glancing at the trees to see where that pure, soft but steady light was coming from" (196). Joe's heart spreads wide open when the young men on the rooftops get their horns ready and blow "just like the light of that day, pure and steady and kind of kind" (196). They are "playing out their maple-sugar

hearts, tapping it from four-hundred-year-old trees and letting it run down the trunk, wasting it because they didn't have a bucket to hold it and didn't want one either" (197). These young men lift their horns straight up and "join the light just as pure and steady and kind of kind" (197). Music and light, the City and music, all blend together to create a language of the heart: the language of jazz: of Jazz.

City, light, and music also merge in what is probably the most often quoted passage from the book, in the voice of what we might call the poetic narrator. This passage shows how these three image patterns flow into each other, along with the human voice:

I'm crazy about this City.
Daylight slants like a razor cutting the buildings in half. In the top half I see looking faces and it's not easy to tell which are people, which the work of stonemasons. Below is shadow where any blase thing takes place: clarinets and lovemaking, fists and the voices of sorrowful women. . . . Nobody says it's pretty here, nobody says it's easy either. What it is is decisive, and if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the City can't hurt you. (7-8)'

When Violet and Joe come to the City they come to it dancing, "And like a million others . . . they stared out

the windows for first sight of the City that danced with them, proving already how much it loved them." And of course, like a million others, "they could hardly wait to get there and love it back" (32). They are like all the other country people who come to town and fall in love: "How soon country people forget. When they fall in love with a city, it is for forever, and it is like forever." (33) Joe and Violet change as much as the others: "in a city, they are not so much new as themselves: their stronger, riskier selves" (33). If they find themselves in the end, it is because they have come to the City for this purpose, and the City empowers them. In the City, "they feel more like themselves, more like the people they always believed they were . . . the City is what they want it to be: thriftless, warm, scary and full of amiable strangers" (35).

All through Jazz the City continues to be personified this way, becoming what V. R. Peterson calls both "setting and character" (37). Indeed, it acts as each, translated most often through the voice of the poetic narrator, which could possibly be the voice of the City itself in its higher flights. The language becomes as various and the images as compellingly higgledy-piggledy as the City itself, with all

four of our major patterns represented:

And the City, in its own way, gets down for you, cooperates, smoothing its sidewalks, correcting its curbstones, offering you melons and green apples on the corner. Racks of yellow head scarves; strings of Egyptian beads. Kansas fried chicken and something with raisins call attention to an open window where the aroma seems to lurk. And if that's not enough, doors to speakeasies stand ajar and in that cool dark place a clarinet coughs and clears its throat waiting for the woman to decide on the key. She makes up her mind and as you pass by informs your back that she is daddy's little angel child. The City is smart at this: smelling good and looking raunchy, sending secret messages disguised as public signs: this way, open here, danger to let colored only single men on sale woman wanted private room stop dog on premises absolutely no money down fresh chicken free delivery fast. And good at opening locks, dimming stairways. Covering your moans with its own. (63-64)

This smooth obligato of secret messages disguised as public signs is the diametric opposite of the public signs which carry the secret messages of love in the narrator's last discursive hurrah. Probably it is also the sort of thing that makes Andrea Stuart say that in Jazz "the complex web of language makes you work just a little too hard, undermining the suspense and revelation," as the "words soar and dip, weave and bop, like some crazy impromptu syncopation, or reverberate like a low-down blues riff" (39). We might wonder what plot revelations Stuart expects

from a book that sets out almost its entire plot on the first page, and what kind of language she expects from a book by Toni Morrison called Jazz. As Stuart herself says, "Thelonious Monk would feel at home here, and so would John Coltrane." (39) Praise with faint damnation indeed.

As we can hear from this example, and the example of the young men on the rooftops blowing so pure and light "you would have thought everything had been forgiven the way they played" (196), there is absolutely no way of separating the City and the music. This may well prove that Morrison has achieved the alchemy of genre transmutation that she signals both in the title and the epigraph to the book:

I am the name of the sound
 and the sound of the name
 I am the sign of the letter
 and the designation of the division.
 "Thunder, Perfect Mind"
 The Nag Hammadi

This quote from the Gnostic Gospel is a broad clue about what Morrison is attempting, what all her "metafictional shenanigans" (Gates 66) are in aid of: creating a book that not only can but must be heard as jazz. In Beloved Morrison's underlying mission is to make us feel the

soulkilling pain of slavery, which she achieves by making us identify deeply with a handful of the "Sixty Million, And More" to whom the book is dedicated. In Jazz Morrison is trying to teach us what Hayden Carruth thinks we must know instinctively: how to feel jazz in all its variousness, its beauty and pain. Music is part of the message, as it occurs again and again in the ruminations of the poetic narrator. But it is also the very medium of the book, as well as its effect: McLuhan's message. Or, as Robert Frost would put it, the aim is song. We must not forget that poetry and music are double first cousins; or maybe even Siamese twins, joined at the hip. This is a book to be heard.

If we take the full measure of responsibility that Morrison insists rightfully belongs to the reader (e.g., to Bonetti), we cannot help but notice that the narrative voice in this book never stays the same for very long at a time. There are three types of breaks that signal change: a full page stop, which indicates large change of subject and probably speaker; a centralized ellipsis, which almost always indicates a time shift; and a small space break, which can indicate subject or speaker change, but usually not both. Unfortunately, it's not so simple as it sounds,

because we do not know what the woman narrator knows for sure, and what she makes up out of whole cloth. She sounds like a very real, down to earth woman at the beginning, a person sidling into idle gossip with a friend about neighbors. She seldom refers to herself in the first person except glancingly, but seems more interested in what is outside herself. Words from the black idiom are also used, such as "siditty," "hincty," "case quarter," and "sweetback," which make her even more an inhabitant of that time and place.

The other main narrative voice, which we have labeled poetic, comes in at the first break. This voice is in many ways distinct from the woman narrator's voice, which seems to be that of a neighbor, or local citizen, or sometimes even that of a participant. The poetic narrator is highly reminiscent of the voice of Darl in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying,⁸ who has an elevated diction and poetic expression in his interior thoughts that he would never be able to duplicate aloud: it is the voice of his core. It is quite possible that this voice is the core voice of the woman narrator, expressing what she is unable to express in her normal diction. Credence is lent to this theory by the

fact that the two voices definitely seem to meld by the end of the book, and start to blend as early as page nine. The voice change necessitates a change in reading style, as the woman narrator moves along with the quick, clipped pace of hot gossip, while the poetic narrator is speculative, dreamy, and quite a bit slower. The combined voice is a fairly rapid in-and-out alternation of the two. In any case, one voice or three, this editorial commentary knits the underlying patterns into an intelligible whole, making critical dissection hard, but breathing life into the book as a jazz composition. It could be called the rhythm section of the piece, either a community rhythm or a rhythm very personal but still representative. This last is more probable, because as the diction gets elevated, the tone gets more self-centered, and I's spring out like Argus. This woman is very interested in herself and her own needs:

I lived a long time, maybe too much, in my own mind. People say that I should come out more. Mix. I agree that I close off in places, but if you have been left standing, as I have . . . it can make you inhospitable if you aren't careful, the last thing I want to be. (9)

This tendency to egoistic introspection heightens and recurs more and more frequently as the book goes on, until it

reaches a fevered pitch during the Golden Gray interlude. The poetic narrator seems to vacillate between liking Golden and hating him, and sometimes she seems to feel she has created him: "What was I thinking of? How could I have imagined him so poorly? . . . I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am." (160) This may be the first time in the history of all literature that the narrator has characterized herself as unreliable, and it certainly raises a lot of questions about the nature of truth in this book, especially when the speaker goes on to say "I have to alter things . . . I want to dream a nice dream for him, and another of him" (161). Who is this woman? Has she made everything up? Is she just staring out at her neighbors, maybe across a Harlem air shaft, dreaming about what goes on in their lives? Is she the jazz equivalent of a griot, telling and retelling the old tales, in new frameworks from time to time? Is she the featured instrument in Morrison's Jazz ensemble, or is she the rhythm section, providing the background and the beat for all the individual voices of the other players? At times, when we hear the voices of Violet and Joe, Dorcas and Alice, Felice and Malvonne we can almost

hear what instruments they are supposed to represent in this sextet with rhythm section. Violet must be a moody clarinet, Joe an alto sax with great emotional range. The others have their own sounds as well, now light, now dark, but always distinctive. Dorcas could never sound like Felice, nor Malvonne like Alice. The Jazz they make sounds like nothing else on this earth.⁹

The fact that we are left with more questions than answers is as Toni Morrison thinks it should be when she tells Kay Bonetti that "poetry doesn't end, and jazz doesn't; they just leave you on the edge wanting a little more." Paul Gray, Elsie Mayer, and V. R. Peterson are all sure there are multiple narrators. Andrea Stuart thinks there is one who is "sly" and "unreliable" (39). David Gates think the narrator got out of Morrison's control in some obscure way, "seems to be a fancy variant of a novelist's proudest gripe: The characters got away from me." (66) About the only thing widely agreed upon is that the narrator (or narrators) is feminine for sure. So many signs point to this that it is virtually inarguable, all the way from her catty criticism of Alice's sparse use of butter to the lonely yearning of the last passage.

There are even hints that it could be Malvonne, who is close enough to do a lot of observing and may well have the psyche of the poetic narrator. A cascade of first person references even suggest at one point (97) that Violet could be the narrator, trying to make sense of it all to herself by laying it out in the third person, much as she externalizes "that Violet."¹⁰ Deborah McDowell calls her the "envious narrator" (9), who would like to be part of the juicy, burning events of the lives of these people, but is not: "this mysterious narrator who finds it easier to aestheticize her people than to feel their pain -- which is her pain, her own unmet desires" (10). McDowell thinks it could be this failure of courage that keeps the characters flat, less rounded as individuals than she would like, but this overlooks their ties to Beloved.

John Leonard confesses that he was at first misled by the epigraph because "Thunder, Perfect Mind" is the Gnostic Gospel revelation of a feminine power, and he let himself believe the narrator was a goddess, or the speaking voice of music itself (perhaps as a clarinet). When he got down to the last, yearning passage we have heard most of, he was confused by the very last lines: "If I were able I'd say it.

Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now." (229) Leonard took this at face value and saw that his hands were holding his copy of Jazz. He thus concludes that "of course, the Voice is the book itself, this physical object, our metatext . . . a whimsy and a wickedness worthy of a Nabokov" (718). Charming as this notion is, it does not quite cover all that needs covering. It may work for the last passage, but everything that has gone before cannot huddle under this whimsical umbrella.

What, if anything, does Morrison herself say about the question of the narrator's identity? Basically, that she won't say, and what's more, can't say. In a National Public Radio interview on All Things Considered in April of 1992, Morrison said that this ambiguity is essentially her gift to the reader, more of the "places and spaces" for the reader to fill in at will. As she told Kay Bonetti nearly ten years before, "the reader is part of the creative process." Poets have known this longer than fiction writers, perhaps, since spacious ambiguity is one of the essential components of much of poetry, especially in twentieth century America. We only have to think of Robinson and Frost, Stevens and

Williams, to verify the truth of this assertion. Morrison brings poetic sensibility to her fiction largely by way of image patterns and narrative structure; and now she brings the musical sensibility as well. When Frost said that poetry is what happens between here-it-comes and there-it-goes, he could just as well have been speaking of jazz. Of Jazz.¹¹

Endnotes

1. The twenty reviews considered are listed here by journal title and author: America (Elsie Mayer); Booklist (Donna Seaman); Chicago Tribune Books (Michael Dorris); Ebony (anonymous); Greensboro (N.C.) News and Record (Ruth Moose); Los Angeles Times Book Review (Richard Eder); Maclean's (Diane Turbide); New Republic (Ann Hulbert); New Statesman and Society (Andrea Stuart); New York (Rhoda Koenig); New York Times Book Review (Edna O'Brien); Newsweek (David Gates); Playboy (Digby Diehl); People (V. R. Peterson); Publishers Weekly (Sybil Steinberg); Time (Paul Gray); Times Literary Supplement (Lorna Sage); U. S. Catholic (Gerald M. Costello); Wall Street Journal (Lee Lescaze); and Washington Post Book World (David Nicholson). In addition, full-dress essays on Morrison which include Jazz have appeared in Nation (John Leonard) and the Women's Review of Books (Deborah A. McDowell). Academic journals have a much longer editorial turn-around time than mass audience publications, and no significant essay has appeared yet in this arena on Jazz, published in the spring of 1992.

2. One of the prettiest music comparisons is in the Ebony review, which says Jazz has the "lyricism and sensuality of a great jazz riff" (16). The title of John Leonard's essay is "Her Soul's High Song" and Deborah McDowell's is "Harlem Nocturne." Michael Dorris's review is called "Singing the Big City Blues" and Andrea Stuart's is "Blue Notes."

3. Ellington continues this description at some length: "'You see your neighbor's laundry. You hear the janitor's dogs. The man upstairs' aerial falls down and breaks your window. You smell coffee. A wonderful thing, that smell. An air shaft has got every contrast. One guy is cooking dried fish and rice and another guy's got a great big turkey. Guy-with-fish's wife is a terrific cooker but the guy's wife with the turkey is doing a sad job. You hear people praying, fighting, snoring. Jitterbugs are jumping up and down always over you, never below you . . . I tried to put all that in "Harlem Air Shaft." (Jazz Is 250) All together, Ellington's source for this work is a lot like the City that is the basis of Jazz. The poetic narrator has more than half a dozen reveries on the riches of the City, all of which share

feeling with Ellington's verbal description of the source of his music.

4. Morrison also discusses the oral quality of her fiction, which has great application to Jazz as well: "What you hear is what you remember. That oral quality is deliberate. It is not unique to my writing, but it is a deliberate sound that I try to catch. The way black people talk is not so much the use of non-standard grammar as it is the manipulation of metaphor. The fact is that the stories look as though they come from people who are not even authors. No author tells these stories. They are just told - meanderingly - as though they are going in several directions at the same time. . . . The open-ended quality that is sometimes problematic in the novel form reminds me of the uses to which stories are put in the black community. The stories are constantly being retold, constantly being imagined within a framework. And I hook into this like a life-support system, which for me, is the thing out of which I come." (McKay 427) This idea of improvisation within the framework is also clearly jazz-like, just as much as the open-endedness and the lack of obvious artifice.

On the question of whether her style is a black style, or the black style, Morrison says that there are many ways of "hanging on to whatever that ineffable quality is that is curiously black. The only analogy I have for it is in music. John Coltrane does not sound like Louis Armstrong, and no one ever confuses one for the other, and no one questions if they are black." (McKay 427)

5. A fine example of language arranged as a musical duet is the entire exchange between Alice and Violet when Violet first goes to visit her. A small part is reproduced here:

"'I don't understand women like you. Women with knives.'
'I wasn't born with a knife.'
'No, but you picked one up.'
"You never did?'
"No, I never did. Even when my husband ran off, I never did that.'" (85)

This sort of mimicry, or enactment, of jazz rhythms occurs frequently throughout the book, often in two-part conversations that sound much like the exchange of riffs between horns. For instance, when Joe is trying to persuade

Malvonne to rent him her spare room, he gives her long, drawn-out, melodic reasons, which she punctuates with small returns, often just "'Uh huh.'" (46-7) We still hear this counterpoint pattern today in a soft drink commercial cycle performed by jazzman Ray Charles.

Jazz being the essential rhythm of Dorcas's body and Joe's blossoming reach for life is reinforced by the vocal patterns of their lovemaking: "She rears up and, taking his face in her hands, kisses the lids of each of his two-color eyes. One for me, she says, and one for you. One for me and one for you. Gimme this, I give you that. Gimme this. Gimme this." (39) This sort of sweet obbligato is typical of the language of their affair early on. That language changes to something more syncopated and staccato later on, but the sweetness still exists in memory.

Even Malvonne, outwardly the least poetic of people, thinks things like "But some of the things he got into during Malvonne's office shift from 6:00 to 2:30 a.m. she would never know; others she learned only after he left for Chicago, or was it San Diego, or some other city ending with O." (41) Both poetry and music are intrinsic to lines such as these, and Morrison expects us to have ears to listen to

the Jazz. Sometimes the rhythm is unmissable, as in this description of the meeting of Joe and Violet: "They were drawn together because they had been put together, and all they decided for themselves was when and where to meet at night." (30) The decided metric regularity here underscores the inevitability of their liaison, and maybe how that predictability palls on Joe. The rhythm also shifts according to need, of course, even in instances as small as the black train attendant's reaction to his work as they reach the City: "Presided over and waited upon by a black man who did not have to lace his dignity with a smile." (31) The clearest instances of this close pairing of sound and sense occurs in the voice of the poetic narrator, which makes sense, as this may well be what makes poetry distinguishable from prose. One of the best examples of this close matching is John Crowe Ransom's "Bells for John Whiteside's Daughter," in which every sound conveys sense. Morrison's ambition seems to be to extend this perfect blend to the length of a novel.

6. "She [Alice] knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn't real music -- just colored folks' stuff: harmful,

certainly; embarrassing, of course; but not real, not serious.

"Yet Alice Manfred swore she heard a complicated anger in it; something hostile that disguised itself as flourish and roaring seduction. But the part she hated most was its appetite. Its longing for the bash, the slit; a kind of careless hunger for a fight, or a red ruby stickpin for a tie -- either would do. It faked happiness, faked welcome, but it did not make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house, music. It made her hold her hand in her apron to keep it from smashing through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew or knew about. Better to close the windows and the shutters, sweat in the summer heat of a silent Clifton Place apartment than to risk a broken window or a yelping that might not know how or where to stop." (59)

7. The first line of this passage brings to mind Georgia O'Keeffe's early cityscapes of New York, dramatic in their slashing black and white, light and dark, and done during the 1920's heyday of jazz. Deborah McDowell also

points out that Jazz incorporates many descriptions of the works of the Harlem Renaissance photographer James Van der Zee, including the one that Morrison discusses with Gloria Naylor, that of an eighteen year old girl dead in her coffin, killed by a lover she would not denounce, published in Harlem Book of the Dead. This seems to have caught Morrison's imagination in the same way the true tale of the slavewoman Margaret Garner's killing of her children did, which provided the germ for Beloved (McDowell 4). This visual quality further enriches the book, creating an even deeper verisimilitude and cultural resonance.

8. In discussing Morrison's literary antecedents John Leonard has a hefty list of previous black women writers who must be "presumed" if Morrison is to be understood fully. He ends with "She also presumes Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison and their brilliant literature of grievance. She presumes, as well, the Bible and Shakespeare. She ate Faulkner for a snack." (706) That her digestion of Faulkner has been complete shows up most often in her narrative structure and strategies, as in this case of the poetic narrator's heightened language, in having multiple narrative

perspectives that overlap and intertwine, and making subtle use of stories told within stories. Neither Faulkner nor Morrison seems addicted to objective truth, knowing as Miss Rosa Coldfield of Absalom, Absalom! does that truth is stronger than mere fact. Some kinship may exist between Absalom, Absalom!'s Shreve, who makes up the story of the gorgeous quadroon, and Morrison's woman narrator, who may have made up Golden Gray's meeting with Wild and Hunter. The point is that both are plausible within the story; both work as emotional truth within the framework provided. Morrison's narrator, at least, deliberately partakes of the nature of jazz.

9. The one exception to this is Eudora Welty's short story "Powerhouse," a great departure from her usual style, and a more compact version of what Morrison has attempted at more length and with more intricacy in Jazz. Welty's story arose from seeing a performance by legendary bluesman Leadbelly, and is also based on the rhythms and form of jazz, although those of the barrelhouse blues rather than the City jazz of Jazz.

10. Violet's doubling of herself in the fourth chapter is reminiscent of Pecola's unwilling personality split in The Bluest Eye, and there are other connections as well. Wild's longing for golden hair (167) also brings that book to mind, as does the uncertain nature of the narrator's voice, moving around in time to focus on people's individual history, whores as sensible community members, and the similarities between Alice and Geraldine, and perhaps Violet and Pauline. This adds much to the sense of Morrison composing a connected history of a people, especially since a concern with motherhood lies at the center of each book; and, of course, at the heart of Beloved.

11. As John Leonard so rightly says, "Jazz, yes; but also Mozart." (718)

TONI MORRISON: A CONCLUSION

In possibly the most wrongheaded diatribe ever written against a living author, Stanley Crouch has a lot to say about Toni Morrison, especially about the "crass obviousness that wins out over Morrison's literary gift at every turn" (41). He also accuses hers of sentimentality, failure of passion, sexism, literary political ambition, and being a literary poseur. Crouch calls Sethe Aunt Medea, implying that she is a mammified version of an old idea, and calls Beloved itself "a blackface holocaust" which has been written to "enter American slavery into the big-time martyr ratings contest, a contest usually won by references to, and works about, the experience of Jews at the hands of the Nazis" (40). The unkindest cut of all is his assertion that Beloved is mainly fit for translation into television fodder. The spewing virulence of this piece leaves the reader feeling unclean, caught in some strange bloodletting like the prom dancers in Carrie. The attack is so overblown and vicious as to feel personal, not intellectual, and not

much of it deserves serious consideration.

This is a pity, because it starts off well with a discussion of how African American literature of the past twenty-five years has been influenced by James Baldwin's view that suffering is both redemptive and deepening to the spirit, with the implication that it is time for black writing to move away from this literature of grievance to a wider theater of operations. This accords well with the universality that is the definite hallmark of Morrison's writing, the end toward which she strives in every book. Crouch misses this effort entirely: "In Beloved Morrison only asks that her readers tally up the sins committed against the darker people and feel sorry for them, not experience the horrors of slavery as they do." (40) Indeed, he misses almost every virtue of Beloved, allowing only that Morrison can "occasionally" write "free of false lyricism or stylized stoicism," but he goes on to say that Morrison "almost always loses control. She can't resist the temptation of the trite or the sentimental." (42) Crouch calls Morrison a "literary conjure woman" several times, and ends by saying that "she is as American as P.T. Barnum" (43), implying that she is not a serious artist at all, but

a purveyor of cheap tricks and thrills. Since all this seems based on some mean-spiritedness or personal aversion, there is very little that can (or should) be answered, except Crouch's opinion that Morrison propagates pity in Beloved, that she does not want her readers to experience the horrors of slavery. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In our examination of Beloved we have seen how Morrison works with intense, intricate care to form patterns from imageric details that result in a sense of living, breathing people for whom we care deeply. We see slavery at its worst in the madness of Halle, the milk-rape and lashing of Sethe, the bestialization of Paul D, and the death of Beloved. Moreover, we feel its permanent keloidal scars, including the spiritual fight for identity still being fought twenty years after escape from physical bondage. The subtle narrative structure takes us in and out of people's consciousness, making us not only know but feel these horrors. We can only wonder what book Stanley Crouch read, or with what veil over his eyes.

Morrison has said to Kay Bonetti, "When I [write] well, the more specific it is, the more universal it becomes." In Holman's discussion of the nature of poetry, the concrete

image is the sturdy basis of all else, the foundation upon which rhythm, figurative language, voice, emotion, and intensity build their structure (384-87). Universality is achieved through particularity, which in Morrison's case is the specific sense details that she uses to build her image patterns. We are reminded that poetry, like God, is in the details.

If poetry is built on specific details, it is also built on ambiguity, on layered meaning and affect. In Morrison's work this ambiguity finds a home in the shifting, protean narrative voices that pull us into the worlds of The Bluest Eye, Beloved, and Jazz. We have seen how in each one it is impossible to name the exact narrator(s) or to point out each shift in consciousness center. This is a deliberate choice Toni Morrison makes to allow the reader room to participate in the creation of the work, as she has told interviewers time and again. This planned ambiguity makes space for a multiplicity of points of view and ways of understanding, both in the books and in their readers.

Morrison has also told interviewers that her endings are deliberately left open so they might add to this spacious ambiguity, and what's more, avoid a sense of

closure she feels is specious and devitalizing. As she told Kay Bonetti, "My books don't close at the end, or end at the close," because she wants their resonance to continue on in the reader's mind like that of a poem. Poetry is like jazz in that it is never finished, never quite enough, and Morrison wants the best of both to inform her work. Beloved is the most intensely poetic of her books, and Jazz comes as close to musical transliteration as we have yet in novel form. The Bluest Eye is her apprentice work in this struggle, though it succeeds quite well on its own terms. All three bring content and form closer together on the literary continuum than most novels ever attempt; Jazz almost tucks the snake's tail into his mouth.

Crouch is right in thinking that Morrison is an ambitious writer, but not ambitious in his way, in the politics of the literary world. Morrison's ambition is to create people and worlds who are concrete enough to be real, ambiguous enough to invite the reader to take part in the creation. Her aim is "to give a true and poetic heart to her work that transcends the written word, surpassing it to the point of feeling, and in turn give that gift to the reader" (Jeffreys).¹ If the reader gives back willingness,

attention, and imagination, the red heart of each book will indeed begin to beat, because as Morrison told Kay Bonetti, "There isn't anything larger than life."

Endnote

1. In the letter from which this quotation is drawn, Jeffreys also suggested the main title of this work, which the author acknowledges gratefully.

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